

James

White

Guest
Editor

Belfast



Several reasons have prevented author James White writing much material for us since his highly successful serial "Field Hospital," published a year ago—an addition to the family (congratulations), an addition to the house (a work-room in the attic to Get Away From It All—congratulations again) and considerable local prestige through the publication by Ballantine Books in New York of his first "Sector General" stories as a book entitled *Hospital Station*. Admittedly he has written one short novel, which was published in USA in *Amazing Stories* as a serial. Entitled "Second Ending" it was placed on the short list of "Best" titles at the recent Chicago World Convention, but was unlisted in the final voting.

These mundane things aside—and despite being a slow writer—his interest in science fiction is as high as ever, and he frequently gets together with artist Gerard Quinn, who lives "just round the corner," and several other Belfast regulars, for informal discussions on their favourite literature. We might well believe that his current Guest Editorial sums up his own personal problems when attempting to write fiction, but behind the tongue-in-cheek approach is a lesson which may well apply to everyone, both reader and author alike.

Apart from his editorial, we hope that it will not be too long before his name once again graces the pages of this magazine, as he has a very large following of enthusiastic readers.

NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

February 1963

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Volume 43, No. 127



● SURVEY REPORT
OF 1962



● ROBERT PRESSLIE
● PETER VAUGHAN
● GORDON WALTERS
● LAN WRIGHT



Twice Bitten

Donald
Malcolm



Guest Editor
JAMES WHITE



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Editor : JOHN CARNELL

TWO SHILLINGS AND SIXPENCE

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Guest Editorial

Author James White is still apparently resting on his laurels after his last exciting serial, "Field Hospital," and if the analogy which follows is based on fact, we can understand why.

The Oppressed Minority

by JAMES WHITE

Since the autumn of 1961, and for a good many years prior to then in *Postmortem*, the Editorial section of this magazine has been concerned with various aspects of the question "What is wrong with Science Fiction?" Some of the views expressed on this subject have taken the shape of brickbats delivered with considerable force and accuracy, and without doubt gave rise to much serious thought and soul-searching to the people on the receiving end, and although they have always been interesting, stimulating and even entertaining, the one thing they have not been is in agreement. What is wrong with s-f today, they claim, is a combination of several things—publishing and distribution problems, editors with bees in their bonnets, and writers. But mainly it is the writers who are to blame for the sorry state of the field today, the great mass of writers who just don't care what sort of story they write so long as it sells and who do not even try to produce the sort of science fiction which the readers want.

This, in my opinion, is not so.

The great majority of s-f writers do *not* deliberately write a badly or carelessly constructed story. They are as concerned over the state of the genre as any single one of its most vociferous and critical readers, because most of them graduated

to their present position through being readers and fans themselves and the ties are still strong. This means that they will consider carefully every piece of advice or criticism, whether it be a fan or professional, and they will try, and try hard, to produce the sort of story demanded of them.

The question which then occurs is "Why, if they listen to everything that is said to them, don't s-f writers give us the stories we want?"

This is a very good question and perhaps the best way of answering it is to don a Hypothetical Observers outfit, complete with handy telepathic device, and eavesdrop on the mental radiation of a science fiction writer who is about to start work on a new story.

It will be immediately obvious that he has problems.

To deal with the sordid side first, there are definite thoughts of Money going through his head—it seems he has a house needing painting, a mortgage needing lifting and a wife, three children and a goldfish requiring a certain minimum quantity of food. But these are just fringe thoughts, the greater part of his mind being taken up with the plot and characters of the story and the way he must treat it and them if it is to be a good story. Because he is remembering all the letter columns and reviews and personal letters and conversations during conventions which together have told him what a good story should contain and how it should, and should not, be written.

To begin with the story must have depth, sweep, scope, vision, imagination, believable characterisation, technical verisimilitude, realistic treatment of sex, social significance and a certain difficult to define quality called Sense of Wonder. So far so good. But his close study of both reader and editor reactions to other stories shows that some of them have been panned for being too shallow and non-cerebral and for being so loaded with significance that the full implications didn't register for days afterwards. Repeatedly he has been told that he must let his imagination soar untrammeled into the farthest reaches of time and space and delve deeper into the even more wonderful complexities of the human mind, but he must never strain the credulity or get embroiled in time paradoxes or show the slightest disrespect for the limiting velocity of light, and he must at all costs avoid writing another one of those awful psi stories.

Only one force can tamper with the ecological balance of a planet and get away with it—
and that is nature.

TWICE BITTEN

by DONALD MALCOLM

Feeling his calf muscles beginning to cramp in protest, Paul Janeba changed his position, careful not to make a noise in the confined, well-prepared, observation post. He made a mental note to bring two groundsheets next time. So much for the joys of ecological work on alien planets, his inner voice jeered. Rheumatism at twenty-one, and a P.E.T. pension.

His companion, Alan Gordon, lying alongside him, was watching intently through binoculars the mating antics of a group of eight, squirrel-type animals, and muttering into the speaker of a small tape-recorder.

“As far as I can ascertain, the group consists of one female and seven males. It would appear that fertilisation involves the services of seven suitors. That could mean that each male secretes a particular sperm type, effective only when combined with the other six.”

“As if sex wasn’t complicated enough!” Paul interjected, grinning.

Doctor Gordon ignored the remark. He had no time for facetious behaviour during working sessions, especially under trying conditions. The ecologists had laboured for almost a week in the gruelling sunlight to construct the post, and Gordon’s temper had telescoped alarmingly. It wasn’t helped by the fact that all team members had to wear protective

plexi-masks, gloves and clothing, because of the attentions of dense swarms of insects akin to bees. A cloud of them hovered over the entrance to the post.

"It would be revealing," the senior ecologist continued dryly in his soft, Scottish burr, "to dissect and examine a group."

Paul smiled to himself. That was a laugh ! They hadn't been able to get within a hundred yards of the animals, let alone catch any. Hence the observation post, in which they had spent two days and nights, waiting for a group to perform their ritual in the dried-up tributary bed.

Much the same thoughts must have been cheering up Gordon. He lapsed into silence and both men resumed watching the rather comical love play below.

For perhaps the twentieth time in the past hour, Paul squinted through the leaves at the noon-high star, and grumbled, "I wish I could take this damn mask off for a few minutes. I'm sure I'm going to drown in my own sweat."

"And the sooner the better !" Gordon snarled, his voice turning hard. "For heaven's sake, stop complaining, Paul. It's as bad for me as it is for you."

He waved a gloved hand at the dizzily gyrating swarm outside. "And surely you haven't forgotten already what happened when one of the bees stung you before ?" he demanded, his eyes wide under his caroty-red Santa Claus eyebrows.

Paul hadn't forgotten. Although a member of P.E.T. 31, he'd been with the Preliminary Survey Team that had discovered the planet, and had been the first—and only—man stung.

A light, heady paralysis had numbed him almost immediately and he'd been confined to bed for four days. During this time, none of his physiological functions had been impaired, and he'd remained conscious, without pain. He'd remembered explaining later that he'd rather enjoyed the experience after he'd hurdled the initial shock.

A thorough medical examination coupled with a battery of tests had revealed one startling fact : there was no trace of any physical agent that could have caused the paralysis.

The P.S.T. leaders had waited anxiously, wondering what else such a beautiful world had in store ? If a mere insect could paralyse a man without leaving a clue, what might be expected of the larger forms of life ?

For it was an entrancing, almost magical, planet, in the inner ecosphere of a smiling yellow star. About three-quarters Earth-size, the land and the sea shared it equally and amicably. The three continents were gently-shaped and verdant, with scarcely a hint of mountain or desert, and all were tonsured with vast sweeps of white sandy beaches, amid subdued waters like liquid sapphire. Plant and animal life abounded, common to all three areas, and the deeps, too, no doubt had their share.

The Survey Department didn't relinquish such gems easily.

At the end of four days, each of which had been marked by a steady improvement, Paul Janeba had fully recovered, none the worse for his enforced rest. The plexi-masks and protective gear had been issued, and the task of preliminary survey had gone on, with the frustrated bees in attendance.

The survey had been a breeze, as someone had (unoriginally) put it.

No polar land masses, virtually no mountain worthy of the name, no deserts, no jungles. The planet was like a vast farm.

The P.E.T. had been given the thumbs-up sign. They named the world Meroe. As it swung along its three-hundred day orbit into a blossom-laden springtime, the team made planet-fall from the mother-ship, *Starfire*.

Team 31, under the command of Senior Leader Matthew Brady, was now a going concern. Much of the initial work was routine : the siting of the base, the layout and the erection of the pre-fabricated huts (a little more elaborate than normal, due to the bees), the cautious probes of the first research programmes.

Above the observation post, a bird began an impassioned song to the glory of the day and even Gordon paused from his work to let the notes fall and shard minutely on the kernel of his soul. He was more receptive to the lure of nature than anyone would have been allowed to suspect.

He was an ecologist, trained to observe the plan of the natural world as an entirety. His childhood had been spent among the wild Scottish hills of his homeland on Earth. He recalled with nostalgia the shimmering days of summer, or the deep hush of winter, when his father had shown and explained to him the abundance and diversity of life in the river and the forest. In his later years, nature had endowed him with a sense of reverence, of humility. He was essentially a humble

man, who felt that he had been allowed to play a small part in the universal plan. Nature was duly rewarded by hard work bordering on the brilliant.

The song ceased, leaving an audible silence, like a benediction, hanging in the warm air, and Gordon returned his attention to the matings of the Eighters, as he had dubbed them.

Paul Janeba sneezed violently.

It sounded like a thunderclap in the stillness of the afternoon, despite his mask.

The Eighters scattered as if peppered with buckshot, and melted into the surrounding grass.

"Damn it all to blazes!" Gordon shouted furiously. "Two weeks' work up a gum tree!" His thin lips quirked with frustration.

"I couldn't help it," Janeba protested petulantly. "Anyway I'm sorry. Do you think they might come back?"

Gordon stared at the pathetic eagerness on the young face, and swallowed his ire. "They might," he conceded gruffly. "We'll wait and see."

But the Eighters didn't return.

As they left the post and plodded to the top of the incline, a strained silence stretched between them like a bar of iron. The miserable lines of Paul's face touched Alan's heart and he said quietly, "Don't worry, laddie, there'll be lots of other times to study Eighters. They'll begin to get used to having humans around, and they won't be so timid."

"Not one as good as that," Paul responded mournfully to the first part of Gordon's remarks. He flogged half-heartedly at the retinue of bees.

"Nonsense, nonsense," Gordon disagreed, anxious now to restore Paul's usually bright disposition.

They reached the jeep, parked beside a copse of fine-leaved trees, slender and aloof, like fashion models, and climbed aboard, Paul at the wheel.

Alan never drove, unless it was absolutely necessary. He stood in awe, and not a little fear, of things mechanical.

Thirty minutes' journey across the rolling grass lands brought them within sight of the Base from the rear.

The huts were laid out in the basic U-plan. It was freely bandied about in the service (although never within his

hearing) that Brady always established his camp in the spot where he could do ten push-ups without undue sweating. He was a fit, energetic man, capable of doing the feat. No one had ever quite plucked up courage to ask him the truth of the matter. Which was perhaps just as well.

Paul halted the vehicle on a rise a couple of hundred yards away from the gate, and leaned his forearms on the wheel.

Before them, the hill sloped unhurriedly to its tryst with the river, where the waters ran in a sparkling mixture of emerald and diamond, taking on the hues of grass and sunlight. The delta reached for miles to the sparsely-wooded farther shore. Thousands of garish pink and grey spindleg-legged birds, twice the size of herons, and of the same general appearance, roistered gaily on the many little islands, and caught fish with their agile yellow bills.

Beyond, the sea burned like a vast rippled sapphire to the horizon, where the next continent to the west smudged the distant limit like an afterthought.

Sighing, Paul pushed the gear in, and headed for the Base. Sgt. Cutter, cool and immaculate as a new banknote in his Marine drill, opened the gate for them.

"Good afternoon, Dr. Gordon, Mr. Janeba."

They returned his greeting, and put the jeep into an empty spot in the vehicle rank, opposite the Marine billets.

Paul was lost in admiration as he watched the sergeant's precise movement as he marched back to the hut. Mere walking never occurred to the N.C.O.

"What a man"! the younger ecologist complimented. "How does he manage to remain so unruffled, so . . . detached from the hurly-burly?" he wanted to know.

"He's a Marine," Gordon answered simply, as if that closed the matter, checking his gear in the back of the jeep.

"Don't you mean he's *the* Marine?"

The senior scientist smiled. "You could be right at that. We'd better report." He was pleased to note that Paul had regained his happy mien. Paul effervesced with the bubbling activity of health salts, but rarely went flat.

They strolled over the yielding grassy carpet towards the Marine billets and entered what was jokingly referred to as the de-lousing chamber. A mild, though harmless, insecticide spray discouraged some adventurous bees, and the two men passed into the compact guardroom, then made their way

along the connecting corridor to the Admin hut at the base of the U, removing their masks as they went.

The corridor arrangement had been adopted as the simplest and most efficient way of thwarting the bees, while ensuring easy access between the various units.

Brady bade them enter and quipped to Doc Whitehead, "Paul looks like a golliwog!" He waved them to seats.

"So he does," Doc agreed, scratching, as Paul raked embarrassed fingers through a mass of dark curls that appeared to be spring-loaded.

Giving his potato-shaped nose a rub, Senior Leader Brady inquired, "Well, Alan, how did your vigil go?"

A smile ventured across Gordon's thin, dour features and made him look almost handsome, despite his vague resemblance to a carrot, wedge face, red hair and faint pink colouring.

With a rare flash of humour, he answered, "Sneezes spoiled my thesis."

Brady and Doc traded mystified glances and stared at Paul who had erupted in laughter.

"Let us into the joke," Brady demanded, a half grin on his pugilistic face mirroring Paul's gaiety.

Gordon related the details of their painstaking preparations and the long wait, how success seemed assured, when Paul Janeba had sneezed. "I was just wondering," Alan concluded, "how my first remark would appear on Paul's doctorate thesis!"

"He'd probably get it for sheer cheek," Doc gave his opinion with a twinkle at the young man.

"Mind if I smoke?" Gordon asked courteously, and lit up at Brady's remark, "Just see me trying to stop you." He shook his head slowly as the cigarette tip glowed like a miniature furnace. "How did you manage to hold out during your field trip?"

Gordon's right eye had long since given up the unequal struggle to stay open against the continual spiral of smoke that drifted up from the cigarette that was usually resident at the corner of his mouth. It gave his intense blue eyes rather a piratical look.

He spoke round the cigarette as if he had been born with it. "Doc gave me an inhibitor that damped the craving for nicotine."

"Why not take it all the time, then?" Paul asked, picking at a broken nail.

"What!" Gordon stared at him in genuine horror. "Do you want me to become an *addict*?"

Not being able to see any difference between the nicotine and its antidote, Brady sat back and invited, "Tell us more about the Eighters, Alan. It's pleasant to have an ecological puzzle for a change, instead of an astronomical one."

This remark evoked a dry laugh from the Doc. He remembered only too well Archer and the Apy enigma. In the literal sense, it had positively put every member of the team under the weather.

"I'll tell you what I can, Matt," Gordon said, settling himself and crossing his legs awkwardly. "You realise, of course, that the puzzle of the Eighters is a comparatively minor one, and I think—only think mark you—that I might have the solution. If it's correct, it'll be no stranger than many of the other ingenious schemes of nature that I've come across."

He knuckled his long, pointed, chin thoughtfully. "Paul here, first observed that the animal in question always went around in groups of eight, no more, no less, hence the name, Eighters—"

Doc couldn't resist, as part of his self-appointed role as Demolisher of the Didactic, remarking blandly, "It's a good job it wasn't a group of five hundred and seventy-two, now."

Gordon muttered a light, "Ridiculous!" but went on in less of a lecturing tone, "They're very shy animals, and to-day was the first real chance we've had of observing them for any length of time." He fumbled for another cigarette and ignited it from the corpse of the previous one.

"There's definitely only one female to each group. We agree on that, don't we, Paul?"

Paul was fascinated by the way in which Gordon's cigarette jiggled as he talked, and he merely nodded his head.

"How can you be so certain?"

Paul came back to life, and answered Doc's question, his freckled face animated. "The female has a distinctive white mark which starts at the tip of her nose and ends at the root of her short tail. Both species are dove grey and they look like

whimsical waiters, with their white shirt fronts." He grinned infectiously. "They're rather likeable little characters."

"Wait till you become a Doctor of Ecology," Gordon prophesied darkly, "and you won't talk like that anymore!"

"You're joking, of course," Paul returned the banter. "You'd love one for a pet."

His senior colleague smiled a slow smile, admitting that he'd been found out, and rounded off his explanation, "I think that there are seven different types of males, in that each has a sperm group unlike that of his fellows."

Brady rubbed his nose wonderingly. " Sounds complicated. What would be the reason for such an elaborate system?"

Gordon shrugged and stretched his legs. He tipped a full inch of precarious ash off his cigarette end. "At some time in the past, I would think that the Eighters were in danger of severely upsetting the ecological balance of Meroe through indiscriminate breeding." He nodded his head knowingly, lapsing into a tutorial tone, "And nature has her own way of setting her house in order."

" Sounds drastic, to me," Doc ruminated, tracing circles on the desk with an idle forefinger.

"Drastic problems necessitate drastic solutions," Gordon replied evenly.

At that point, Andy Douglas, the burly radio man, came in, nursing a thumb bandaged as thick as a sausage, and sat down at his table in the corner.

" Been sucking your thumb, again?" Paul ribbed him, raising a laugh.

Douglas looked embarrassed. " I hit it with a hammer."

"The classic excuse!" Paul threw up his hands, then sobered as Brady asked Gordon, "Have you found out anything more about the bees, Alan? If we could lick that problem, it would make Meroe a paradise planet, and stick a feather in our cap."

The ecologist looked even more glum than usual. "It's a tricky problem, Matt," he said evasively, smoothing down his bright red hair, "and we can't get a toehold anywhere. Short of indulging in wholesale extermination on one continent, I frankly see no solution so far. We can't take that course. No species can be totally eliminated without knocking the whole ecological system haywire," He fell silent, then added, "I'll have to have a long, deep, think about this."

Matt encouraged, " You do that, Alan, and then we'll talk about it again."

The two ecologists rose to leave.

" You've remembered about to-night, by the way ?"

They nodded. It was Sgt. Cutter's birthday, and Brady had secretly arranged a celebration. Secret, that was, to no-one except the sergeant. And he had something up his sleeve that no one else, not even Doc, knew about.

The ecologists were in the same billet and they went along to wash and change.

" Do you think we'll have to abandon Meroe ?" Paul wanted to know, as he smeared some depilatory cream over his almost non-existent fuzz.

" Because of the bees, you mean ?" Alan laid out fresh clothes on the small bunk and examined them critically. " No, I don't think so."

" I must say," the younger man exclaimed, looking at Gordon in the mirror, " for a man who professes to be clueless—and I mean that in the nicest sort of way, Alan—about the bees, you're very see see see."

" I wish you'd stop talking in idiotic riddles, it'll be the end of you, yet," the other snapped irritably, half out of his shirt. " What's that supposed to mean, anyway ?"

Paul grinned. Wiping off the cream, and examining his chin, he supplied, " Cool, calm and collected, of course."

" Anything but, laddie !" Gordon contradicted vehemently, fumbling with a button. " I haven't met a problem yet that can't be solved—" He broke off as he caught Paul's knowing look. " And you can wipe that expression off your baby complexion. You're saying to yourself, ' I've got him wound up, now !' Well, so you have, and it's only yourself to blame !"

The young ecologist didn't deny a word of the accusation. Gordon usually had many shrewd things to say when he was " wound up " and he, Paul, enjoyed and benefitted from the experiences.

Having unloaded his grouse, Alan resumed his pocket lecture on the solving of problems, while pursuing the practical job of donning fresh clothes.

" What is a problem ? That is, in a manner of speaking, the first—er—problem. It is an unknown, or rather, a number of unknowns."

" You're not solving that particular problem," Paul interrupted casually.

" Eh ? Oh, yes." Sheepishly, Gordon put his leg into the correct trouser.

" In order to solve a problem, you have to be able to observe it. This means that you have to ask the right questions. That's the secret. A puzzle remains unsolved as long as the right questions remain unasked." He sat down on the bunk and lit a cigarette. " I suppose an analogy would be the controversy that raged for a while during the initial pioneering days of space flight. Was it to be men or instruments in space ? What tended to get lost in the welter of argument was a good solid fact : an instrument can measure only that phenomenon which it is designed to detect. The Van Allen radiation belts overloaded the counters on *Explorer I*. They weren't designed to register such intensity of radiation.

" And so it is with a question. Frame it in the most telling way, and it will provide the answer you want."

Paul nodded sagely, causing Alan to hide a grin, and remarked, " The gist of your cerebral meanderings boils down to this : we aren't asking the right questions."

" The magnitude of your profundity astonishes me !" Gordon mocked with gentle irony, seeking to deflate Paul's smugness.

" I didn't know it showed that much," Paul came back at him, laughing.

Gordon stood up and leaned by the window, gazing out at the fair face of Meroe, her hills and trees serene under the azure smile of day. The peaceful beauty made his eyes prick hotly.

" I will not give this planet up !" he breathed, with a hardening resolve. " It would be good for a man, here. He could put down roots and know what it really means to commune with nature."

He turned to find Paul looking at him with a strange understanding. With a flash of insight, Paul Janeba said, " You're tired of wandering, aren't you, Alan." It wasn't a question.

The senior ecologist seemed to crumple as he responded silently to the compassion.

He answered slowly. " Yes, Paul, I am very tired. I'm not a young man any longer, despite all the fancy hormones and

what-have-you. And your expression tells me that, for perhaps the first time, you are conscious of the disparity in our ages." Paul flushed and dropped his gaze. "I can double your age, and add five years on to that. Ah, don't look so despairing, laddie. I haven't one foot in the grave, or anything like that," he went on, striking a brighter note. He relaxed again, propping himself up on one elbow.

"You hit the jackpot about wandering, Paul. I've seen a hundred worlds, each one different, and yet the same. Until now, that is. If I were a poet, I would find the words to express what I feel. What I have grown to love about Meroe is her . . . innocence?"

He shook his head disparagingly. "Very badly put."

"On the contrary, very well put. You speak of the planet as if it—she—were a beautiful woman, sweet and virginal."

Alan's face clouded slightly, and, inexplicably, Paul wished he hadn't said that.

The older man yawned and stretched. "I'm tired of wandering, Paul. I want to put down some of those roots I was talking about. But I'm not tired of living, or thinking, and we're merely scratching the surface of the ecology here. There's enough work to last me a lifetime."

"You sound as though you intend to stay—"

"Oh, I do. Once this little problem is solved." Gordon glanced at his watch. "Time for chow. Let's go." He swung himself off the bunk and explored his body for signs of surplus *avoirdupois*. "Not bad, not bad at all." He was faintly smug.

As they went out the door, he put his arm round Paul's narrow shoulders. "There's something I forgot to mention, laddie. Every problem is solved with a slice of that very valuable commodity, luck. The chance phrase, the unforeseen accident, the experiment that produced an unexpected and world-shaking result."

Their progress to the mess hall was being impeded, now, by other neatly turned-out scientists and technicians, and their conversation was submerged in chatter and debate.

Reaching the mess hall door, Gordon concluded, "Never neglect luck. You don't have to start studying the diseased livers of ducks or rabbits, in Roman fashion, but bear my words in mind when you're an eminent ecologist."

"I won't enjoy my meal," Paul protested, grinning, manœuvering to find a place. All the tables had been pushed together to make a huge, rectangular surface, and this was laid with a spread that was almost epicurean.

They settled themselves about half-way down the table; and casting a ravenous glance over the tempting assortment of food and drink, Paul exclaimed with schoolboy fervour, "We all wondered what was in those mysterious crates that came with the last courier ship, and now we know." He licked his lips in anticipation. Eating was one of his favourite pastimes.

Senior Leader Matthew Brady and Doc Whitehead entered the hall, and stood inside the doorway. It was a minute or two before five-thirty, the stipulated meal time. A few stragglers came in and jostled into some of the seats at the foot of the table.

There was a pause in the hubbub of talk as a rhythmic marching of feet became evident, and Sgt. Cutter's clipped voice could be heard adjuring someone, "Straighten up! You look like a sockful of soggy custard!"

Laughter rippled over the assembled men.

Brady hushed them and gave the signal as the Marines filed in as one man, Sgt. Cutter in the rear. As per Brady's orders, they scattered to their places like marbles spilling out of a bag, leaving the N.C.O. in sudden isolation.

His puzzled eyes took in the details of the unfamiliar layout, the spread, and the fact that everyone was standing, grinning at him as if he'd just won the Galactic Lottery twice running.

His composure deserted him completely for a moment as, with more enthusiasm than harmony, the men launched with gusto into the time-honoured 'Happy birthday—'

Sgt. Cutter strove to maintain a soldierly dignity while the song ground its uneven but sincere path to the conclusion. This was followed by an outbreak of cheers and congratulations. His effort didn't succeed. His normally severe mouth softened into a shy grin and his eyes sparkled as brightly as his decorations. As someone joked afterwards, with his close-cropped hair, he looked like a brush with a smile underneath.

"Many happy returns, sergeant," Brady said, taking one elbow, while Doc added his remarks, and took the other.

"Thank you, sir," the still-bewildered Marine replied, finding himself being guided to the top of the table and being seated between his two escorts.

"That's the most pleasant close arrest I've ever seen!" a technician quipped, bringing a gale of laughter sweeping down on the sergeant. The men were prepared to enjoy themselves, and Brady wisely let them have their heads.

There was enough food and drink to satisfy everyone, with the birthday cake, a three-foot high, white-iced rocket with the Space Marine Corps emblem in blue and black on the nose, the base surrounded by flickering candles, drawing a round of appreciative applause for the team cook.

It was placed before Sgt. Cutter, and with no lack of encouragement, he succeeded in blowing out the candles at the second attempt.

Brady stood up and an immediate hush fell like a blanket of snow.

He rubbed his nose reflectively, and began, "No birthday party is complete without a present, and I have one here that will please not only its recipient, but also everyone present."

He lifted a folded paper, opened it, and read solemnly, "'By the authority vested in me under the Rules and Regulations of the Space Navy Council, I have pleasure in endorsing the promotion to the rank of Lieutenant the undermentioned N.C.O., Sergeant Nathaniel Cutter, Space Marine Corps. John T. Cochran, Naval Secretary.'"

For a timeless moment, the roomful of men seemed to be in limbo. The Marine's normally ruddy colour had ebbed, leaving his face almost as white as the table cover. His mouth quirked.

The ovation broke with the swiftness of a tropical storm as Cutter rose slowly to his feet, and donned his cap. His salute was awe-inspiring in its execution and proud in its respect.

He stood as stiff as a severe reprimand while Brady affixed a gold-and-platinum sunburst to either epaulette, handed over the traditional short cane, then shook the new officer's hand warmly. Many of those watching had a momentary pang of regret that they hadn't joined the Space Marines, to have the privilege of serving under Cutter.

The cane top was solid gold and ivory.

"It's a small token of our respect and affection, Lieutenant Cutter, and we wish you every success in your new rank. Congratulations."

He sat down, leaving the Marine the centre of expectant attention. His tough fingers caressed the polished wood of the cane.

When he spoke, his voice had lost its honed edge.

"Senior Leader Brady, gentlemen, I am at a loss for words—"

"That's something new, sir!" one of his men shouted from the foot of the table.

Amid the laughter, Cutter fixed the man with a stare, but his brisk retort was chuckle-loaded: "And I wouldn't want to begin my career as an officer by preferring a Court Martial charge!"

Having scored his point, he went on, more relaxed than anyone had ever seen him before.

"I am deeply conscious of the great honour that has been paid to me, and I will endeavour to live up to my new obligations . . ." He hesitated and coughed slightly, a conspiratorial grin hovering about his lips. "Some of you might know that there have been Cutter representatives in the Marine Corps for three centuries. During that time, there has been only one officer. He was breveted on the field and a few minutes later, he lost an argument with a bullet, by way of paying him for his impertinence!"

This sally merited more laughter, then he concluded on a more sober note, gesturing to the skies with one hand, and to the nether region with the other. "I can't help wondering what my ancestral ghosts have in store for me, but, whatever it may be, I shall be ready. Thank you."

The next ten minutes were given over to hand-shaking and back-slapping, then the crowd sundered into small groups, talking and laughing and having a good time.

Paul found Alan Gordon stuck like a dunce in a corner, an untouched drink in his hand, and a frown of deep concentration ploughing furrows across his brow.

"Hey, what gives with the sober face, Alan? Isn't that great about Lieutenant Cutter?" he bubbled on, not waiting for an answer, "and the man's a wit, too." His glance skipped over the raucous crowd, and he bounced about like a ping-pong ball on a jet of water at a sideshow. "This is some party! Huge fun!" He paused. "What is wrong with you? Something you ate? Can I get you some bicarb—?"

"Get into low gear, for heaven's sake, laddie, you make me feel old." He was smiling.

Paul sat down as Gordon told him with as much excitement as he'd ever work up, "Remember I told you about luck playing a large part in solving a problem? Well, I think I might have found my piece."

He sipped his drink and looked contemplative.

"Out with it, then!" Paul prodded him eagerly, causing the drink to splash. "Don't keep me in suspense."

"Take your time," Gordon admonished, using a handkerchief to dab at his shirt, while his young colleague fumed his impatience. Gordon lit a cigarette and began talking round it. "It was a chance remark that did it, and I could kick myself twice round the Base for not thinking about it.

"We had assumed that the bees were following everyone around here. That isn't true. I overheard one technician telling another that he'd worked all day without a solitary bee venturing within a mile of him."

"So?" A half-eaten sandwich neglected in Paul's hand broke and fell unheeded to the floor.

"So," Gordon echoed, quaffing his drink, and rising, "I'm going to see a man about a bee."

Before Paul could gather his wits, Alan was off across the floor, heading for Andy Douglas.

Paul watched them in a brief exchange of earnest conversation, then the two men returned, Andy ejaculating as they passed out of the room, "Are you sure you don't need some bicarb?"

Joining some of the Marines, Paul tried to pay attention to the anecdotes one of the men was telling about Cutter. But he found his concentration wandering, and he kept glancing at the door. He laughed when the others laughed, and was thought no more inebriated than they.

Forty minutes slogged by on leaden feet before Alan and Andy returned, the former positively beaming. Alan rejoined Paul, while Douglas sauntered off again.

"What was that pantomime all about?" Paul demanded.

"The first real clue to the puzzle, that's what." He went on to amplify his statement. "I was in touch with the Library aboard *Starfire*, delving into a potted history of bees. The species here is basically similar to Earth bees. Now—among the many interesting facts which emerged was this: if a person is stung by a bee, he automatically becomes a target for sometime in the future, due to some kind of secretion left by the

bee." He lit the inevitable cigarette, and continued, "The bee's pals can detect this—the victim acting like a beacon—and they home in on him."

Comprehension showed in Paul's eyes, and he munched absently at a sandwich as Gordon went on, "As I said earlier, we assumed that the bees were following everyone around, but—"

"—They were—are—after me," Paul finished, a trifle uneasy. He laid the sandwich aside, his appetite abruptly gone.

"Right first time. You're a target. I think we're within an ace of getting to the bottom of this. I want to try an experiment, to-morrow."

Paul interrupted warily, "With me as the bait, I'll bet!"

Gordon grinned disarmingly. "Who else. After all, you're the only one who's been bitten. What a stroke of luck that you stayed over."

"That," Paul asserted tartly, "depends on the point of view."

Gordon tipped the ash off his stub. "As I was saying—you came to no harm the last time. Will you help me?" As a clincher, he added, "This could be the very subject for your thesis."

"You crafty old reprobate! Of course, I'll help. Anything in the cause of science."

"Good, good. All we have to do now is convince Matt and Doc, and then we'll be all set."

"This is going to be a case of twice bitten, and once *what?* I wonder," Paul punned, with a jocularity he was far from feeling.

Gordon approached Brady and Whitehead immediately, and the four men went to Brady's office. When they were seated comfortably, the Senior Leader invited the ecologist to enlarge on his ideas.

"The paramount point we have to consider is this," Brady initiated the general discussion, after Gordon had concluded his statement. "Can we afford to take a chance with Paul's life? Have we any right to do so? Basically that is what we would be doing."

"Matt's right," Doc wheezed, scratching the ample bulge holding up his trousers. "I wasn't here when Paul was stung the first time, but I know it did cause quite a panic."

"Here, here," Paul chipped in faintly. "That's putting it mildly."

"But," Doc pursued, "there is a strong credit side to the incident. Paul remained conscious all the time—except for the normal sleeping periods—experienced no pain or any kind of damage—that we know of, I'm bound to add. He's disgustingly healthy in mind and in body. And we have his own admission that he enjoyed the interlude."

"Is that still sufficiently strong reason for possibly endangering Paul's life?" Brady returned to the attack, rubbing his nose fiercely. "I'm deeply concerned for that. What would happen to our careers should something go wrong isn't worth mentioning. Surely, if it is decided to move colonists in at a later date—and I see nothing else to prevent the Colonisation Department doing so—controlled extermination of the bees can always be carried out."

Gordon bristled, pausing in the act of taking another cigarette. "That is never a solution, in any circumstances. I've surely made that clear enough?"

"You're prejudiced," Brady shot back, rubbing his nose. Gordon almost leapt out of his chair. "Prejudiced be damned, Matt! I'm merely giving you a professional opinion. Only one force can tamper with ecological balance and get away with it, and that's nature. Besides, it's never a hasty action. By that, I mean that it may extend over thousands of years, and we don't deal in that kind of time." His hands were shaking as he lit the cigarette. This tirade sobered them.

"What do you think about this, Paul?" Brady switched the conversation.

Paul teetered on his chair-edge. "I'm all in favour of it. I have complete faith in Alan. Also, if the experiment he has in mind succeeds, it will prove conclusively that the bees are after me *for a purpose*, and that's something we haven't considered: the possibility of purpose existing." He paused, and his face looked older, more mature. "For a reason I can't remotely explain, or even understand, I have the feeling that a purpose *does* exist, and a beneficial one at that."

Brady pursed his lips. "It's settled, then. At least this time we have the advantage of having a certain measure of control over an experiment. Let's go and see if the party's still alive."

The fateful day dawned as the warming star breathed life into the heady, exhilarating air. The sleepy land, a-glitter with a profusion of star-bright dew drops, rolled with the assuredness of all eternity to the horizons. The trees reached politely for the first, tentative caressing fingers of sunlight, while the flowers, of all the subtle hues on nature's palette, prepared to receive their humble share.

The river delta exploded into a vast, living chequer-board of pink and grey as the thousands of waders raised a raucous cacophony, and the waters chuckled merrily at their cumbersome performance.

Brady wasn't quite so hilarious about it all, having spent a restless night, and he pulled the pillow over his head, and tried to get back to sleep. The attempt being unavailing, he rose, and finished off what the waders had started by indulging in a hard, stinging shower. He dressed quickly and strolled down to the river.

He had no difficulty in following the footprints already evident on the moist grass.

Gordon was perched on a thin shelf of blackish rock, watching the antics of the colourful waders, and Brady joined him.

The yellow star had cleared the horizon, and it continued to prise loose the grip of the paling night with a wash of faintest rose-gold light.

"Isn't this a bewitching world!" Gordon said softly, and he might have been speaking to himself. "Did you ever see a land so fair, a sky so tall, that the blueness seems to go on for ever and ever? I hope I prove a worthy tenant of it."

Matt wasn't surprised by this revelation. He'd had similar thoughts recently. People such as himself, Doc, Alan, even Lieutenant Cutter, belonged to a fading generation with only one foot in tomorrow. That time belonged to the young, like Paul, who hadn't had time, yet, to grow cynical and weary, a little tired of wonder piled upon wonder.

"You could do worse," he said, scuffing his foot in the fine sand. "What of Earth; don't you want to go back there?"

Gordon shook his head and his gaze followed one of the waders as it flapped noisily across his line of sight. "The man who called Earth a cradle was right. And I don't want to live out my days in a cradle. At least, not in one that's been occupied for so long. This is a pleasant new one, waiting to nurture the seeds of the future."

The sunlight glinted approval in his red hair.

"I'd like to join you," Brady confided, walking along the sand a few paces. "Unfortunately, it would have to be deferred until my contract expires in two years. Your one-shot contract lets you out."

"And what a lucky shot it was," Gordon replied, as he stood up and stretched, feeling the blood jumping in his veins. "I could do with a drink of something hot. Coming, Matt?"

In companionable silence, they made their way back to Base. In response to the latent heat of the day, golden clusters of bees began weaving dizzy spells in the air.

At 9 a.m. sharp, every member of P.E.T. 31 was gathered in front of the Admin hut, one hundred and twenty men in all, waiting for Brady to begin.

The Senior Leader started to rub his nose, remembered his plexi-mask, and plunged straight into the deep water of his statement.

"I want every man to remove his mask and his gloves."

While a babble of subdued talk ensued, Brady set an example by taking off his own.

Keeping one eye on the clouds of bees that were never far away, the men followed suit, and were immediately compensated by their first few breaths of the fresh, sea-tanged air.

Brady left the steps of the hut and stood before the first rank, facing the men. Two inquisitive swarms drew near, hovering over the uneasy crowd.

"Now—listen carefully, and follow my instructions. All those on my left move a few yards to their right." He shot his left arm up as a marker. Then he did the same with the group on his right, so that they were separated by about fifteen yards.

After a few minutes, one of the swarms drifted over the right-hand group, while the other swarm flew away.

Brady dismissed the left-hand group, and told them to move well back. The bees made no attempt to follow.

He positioned himself again in the front rank of the sixty or so remaining men, and carried out the same procedure as before.

Again the bees showed a preference for a particular group.

Wasting no time, Brady whittled the number down. By 9.35 a.m., a solitary figure shuffled from one foot to the other,

with a swarm of bees, like a scattering of gold dust, a few feet above his head, the centre of attraction.

As Alan Gordon had predicted, Paul Janeba was the target.

A strange calm held the area. The birds stopped singing and the waders down by the delta ceased their bickering. The almost imperceptible breeze wilted. The planet seemed to be listening, waiting.

Doc checked surreptitiously to see that the stretcher-crew was ready.

Slowly, the gyrating swarm began to disintegrate. Two distinct globes formed and streamed off in different directions, leaving one bee behind like a lost coin.

It was a fat fellow, round and prosperous-looking, and as it performed some leisured aerial callisthenics, its fairy wings and dusky gold body shimmered in the sunlight.

Gradually, it slid down the warm air, and landed on Paul's left shoulder. He forced himself to refrain from any sudden movement.

The bee made a waddling exploration of the cloth, took off, and came to rest on his exposed left wrist.

It stung him and a number of things happened simultaneously.

The bee departed, Paul jerked a number of times, puppet-like, then collapsed abruptly as if the strings had been cut; Doc's crew went into action, loaded the still-conscious ecologist on to the canvas, and doubled with him to the Medical hut.

The remainder of the men dispersed to their various jobs, speculating vociferously on the recent event.

In the hut, the bearers made Janeba comfortable on a bunk and Brady and Gordon watched anxiously while Doc, having dressed the wound, took the boy's pulse, and made various routine checks.

So far, Paul hadn't spoken, although, by the movements of his eyes, they could see that he was obviously aware of them. His features were wan, but very relaxed, and a curious smile, somewhere between happiness and sadness, was on his lips.

Doc squared his shoulders and scratched an ear with a relieved finger. "He's all right, in fine shape. No paralysis, nothing. In fact, I can't discern any reason why he shouldn't jump up and dance a jig."

Paul spoke weakly from the bed and they stooped quickly to catch his words.

"Alan . . . bees intelligent . . . telepathic . . . what a beautiful world . . . willing to share . . ."

He smiled fleetingly and stopped talking. His head lolled a bit.

"My God!" Gordon burst out, then broke off as Doc chuckled deeply, "Sleeping like the proverbial baby."

Gordon muttered in relief, "I thought he had gone, there." He put his hand to his brow. Helping him to a chair, Brady said, "Me, too. I felt my heart turning cartwheels for a minute."

Gratefully, Gordon gulped the glass of sedated water Doc handed to him, then lit a shaky cigarette. His face was devoid of colour and he kept crossing and re-crossing his legs. Doc removed the cigarette from his fingers and made him lie back. "We can't have two ecologists laid up at the same time," he twinkled.

"Thanks, Doc."

The sedative took effect instantaneously and Gordon was able to join in the discussion of Paul's remarks.

"Intelligent bees," Brady mused. "I don't suppose that's too much to swallow. It's the telepathic bit that gets me. I wonder how long he'll sleep?"

"There's no telling," Doc glanced at his patient. "Could be five minutes, or five hours."

"Or five days," Gordon supplied, rolling his head experimentally. It didn't explode or fall off, so he sat up. "There's not much point in spending the time in idle speculation, so, if you'll excuse me, Matt, I'll go and get some work done."

"Sure you feel able?" Brady was concerned.

"Never better. I'm going out for a full ration of that wonderful air." He stood up.

"Don't overdo it," Doc cautioned. "That sedative, combined with some deep breathing, could lay you out." He turned to Matt, who was rubbing his nose, and staring absently at the sleeping ecologist. "Matt, why don't you go with Alan and see that he takes it easy for the next hour?"

Brady grinned. "I know when I'm being ordered out. Come on, Alan." He took the red-haired man's arm. He said over his shoulder, "I'll send a technician in to rig up a tape-recorder, in case Paul talks in his sleep."

Doc nodded approval, but his mind was already on other matters.

Paul slept about three hours, during which time, so many people had called in for news, that Doc had grown almost irritable.

He called Brady and Gordon right away when Paul wakened. They found Doc studying Paul, who was blinking like a rudely-disturbed owl.

"Has he said anything?" Brady asked, moving to the bunk, with the senior ecologist in close attendance. "Is it all right to speak to him?"

"You can try," Doc decided, and Brady said, "Paul—can you hear me?" He leaned forward anxiously.

"Of course I can hear you!" Paul answered matter-of-factly, grinning as Brady recoiled, as if struck by a snake.

"There's nothing wrong with me," he continued, flexing his shoulder muscles, "so stop looking like professional mourners at a wake. And I'm hungry!"

"I'd better start at the beginning." His listeners, who now included men who had drifted in unheeded, and who hung on at the fringe, waited impatiently.

"The bees are an intelligent race, that's the first and most important point. It's a racial intelligence, not an individual one. A few thousand—or million—bees more or less, makes no difference."

He accepted the plate of sandwiches Doc handed him, and continued to talk, as he ate with relish. "When the P.S.T. landed, the bees recognised that contact would have to be made. This could only be done by finding a link—which happened to be me."

Lifting another sandwich, he said, "When I was stung the first time, the full force of the intelligence poured into me, as a kind of preliminary shot. The intention was to sting a few people. This couldn't be rushed, in case a mass attack be construed the wrong way, as it probably would have been. Our reactions were so quick that the opportunity didn't arise. The bees hadn't reckoned with the super-efficiency of a highly trained team. I became the target, and I had to have a booster shot before I could tune into their wavelength, as it were."

He munched contentedly at a sandwich, while the assembled men thought over his remarks.

"What else did you find out?" Brady asked, forgetting, for once, to rub his nose. Intelligent, telepathic bees yet!

"They're willingly to share their world with us. They could easily have driven us off, you know. They can control all the other animals and birds, if need be, and an attack would have been a real ecological onslaught."

He hesitated, as if exhausted, then requested, "I'd like to talk to Alan alone, now, sir, if you have no objection."

Brady waved an affirmative hand. "None at all. I'll have to go, anyway, and start preparing my report. Come on, Doc, lads, clear out."

"What did you want to talk about, son? Do you feel up to it?"

Paul said nothing for a long minute; he seemed to be so immersed within himself that Gordon wondered if he had forgotten what he wanted to say.

"I don't know how to put it into words, Alan," he began, looking down at his twining fingers. "During my sleep, I communed with nature. A kind of mental communion, as opposed to a simply visual experience. I saw the planet through the racial intelligence. I could sense the growing of the grass and the flowing of the sea and the pure joy of living that exists here. Nature was a vibrant entity."

He stopped, a lump in his throat. Gordon had his head bowed and Paul couldn't see his face, but he, Paul, knew what Gordon must be feeling.

"Alan." The ecologist looked up slowly, his eyes full of longing and regret and, oddly, happiness. "I had to tell you, Alan, even though I knew it would shatter your dreams."

Gordon smiled. "You shattered no dreams, laddie. I'm humanly envious, that's all, and I hope you'll allow me that." He cocked his head. "Are you telepathic, now; can you read my mind?"

Paul closed his eyes briefly in negation. "Even now, the experience is fading, growing dim. But I think I shall retain heightened awareness, of nature, and probably of people."

"Your thesis is going to stand them all on their ears, that's certain. And one thing more—I'm even more determined than ever to stay here. From now on, this is *home*."

"That makes two of us."

In his office, Brady was chewing worriedly on his pen.

Doc came in, and occupied his favourite, specially-strengthened chair. "You have a problem?" he inquired, scratching his paunch.

"Oh, no!" Brady responded, with elaborate sarcasm, which had no effect on his friend. "Answer me this: how would *you* go about telling H.Q. that you want to conclude a pact with a swarm of intelligent bees?"

The crew of the ship had been brought up in a society where the machine was supreme—but when the machinery failed, there remained only human ingenuity.

LIVE TEST

by PETER VAUGHAN

As the tape spewed from the small computer, Benson stared at it in disbelief. It just couldn't be true. He checked again. He took the readings from the autonav and fed them, together with the engineer's figures of speed, present mass and initial drive performance, into the desk machine. Once more, the computer produced a ridiculous answer.

He tried again, and again.

Ten tries later, there was no doubt. The *Achilles* was more than twenty light-years off track, and heading into uncharted space.

Benson felt his stomach turning over. His innate trust of machines had been rudely shattered. Without machines he was helpless. He sat there, staring at nothing, wondering what to do. After a while he realised there was only one thing he could do. With an effort he stopped the trembling of his hands and reached for the small microphone that hung above him.

“Captain to the flight deck, please.”

The master of the *Achilles* strode on to the flight deck. A massive man, he wore his responsibility without fuss, his uniform a seemingly unnecessary adjunct to his quiet authority.

Benson was almost incoherent. “Sir, the computer, it's—the autonav is off course—I mean—”

Captain Shannon held up his hand. "Please, Mr. Benson, calm yourself. Let's start at the beginning. Now, what seems to be the trouble?"

Benson drew confidence from his Captain's firm, unruffled manner.

"It's the autonav, sir. I was doing the four-hourly check—I'd only just come on duty—I fed the readings into the computer and—well, I tried it a dozen times and the computer says we're off course by twenty light-years with an angular heading of ninety and forty-one degrees from Earth trajectory!"

For all the change in the Captain's expression, Benson might have been discussing a faulty panel-lamp that needed exchanging.

"You're quite certain the computer is not faulty?"

"Quite sure, sir. I've run the standard test and it came out perfectly."

Captain Shannon fingered his jaw thoughtfully. Then he said, "Get Mr. Evans to have a look at the autonav, and I think we'll stop the ship, no sense in continuing in error. Then you can plot us a course for home."

Benson was about to utter his automatic 'Yes, sir' when it dawned on him what the Captain meant. A laborious search through the star charts, then an even more tedious series of calculations. It would take hours.

"But, sir, I couldn't possibly—"

"Couldn't possibly what, Mr. Benson? How else are we to reach Earth? You have the computer, the charts and, may I remind you, the training. Carry on, Mr. Benson."

Benson struggled with a mixture of protest and embarrassment. The Captain's remark about training hit hard. True, he had solved navigational problems in the classroom, it had been easy. In space, he had never been called on to do anything other than the regulation four-hourly check. The machines did it all.

In this moment, Benson realised that his career was on trial. If he had to call on one of his brother officers for help in what was, after all, his job, then he could expect no mercy from the company. There were plenty of young men on the ground, ready and eager to take his place.

He straightened his shoulders. "Very good, sir."

He stood up and walked over to the master console. With now steadier fingers, he switched on the retro-drive and set the

timer to switch it off when the ship came to a standstill. He reached for the mike and said, "Chief Engineer to the flight deck, please."

Captain Shannon walked slowly out of the control room, his face thoughtful. He hadn't wanted to be so curt with young Benson, but the boy had to learn his responsibility fully. What was more worrying was Benson's momentary loss of self-control. True, it was frightening to suddenly find yourself twenty light-years from where you thought you were. But this was a hazard of the job, this was what they were paid for.

Shannon realised that Benson, as an individual, was not entirely at fault. He was a product of the times. Benson and his contemporaries had been brought up in a society where the machine was supreme. Everything, even simple arithmetic, was done for them, automatically. Mechanical and electrical failure was virtually unknown, and the children of this regime naturally gave themselves unreservedly to the concept of infallibility in their machine world. Shannon could remember a time when machines were not so reliable, not quite so highly regarded. In those days a man had to be prepared for machine failure and to do the machine's work if necessary.

Today, the training of a spaceman included only a perfunctory knowledge of the workings of each piece of equipment. It was considered enough for him to know how to operate it. True, he could replace defective units, but as for determining the nature of the fault, or taking over the machine's job, well, it was hardly ever necessary.

Now, thought Shannon, it was necessary. The autonav was a sealed unit and they didn't carry a spare. Evans the engineer, would do his best, but it wasn't really in his line.

The Captain sighed and opened the door to his cabin. He sat down at his desk and picked up the phone and punched the button marked COMMUNICATIONS. When a bored voice answered, he said, "This is the Captain, give me a radio fix, please, I'll hold on."

"Right away, sir."

Shannon noted with amusement that the bored voice had suddenly become an attentive and respectful voice. As he waited, he wondered whether Benson had thought of asking for a radio fix. More credit to him if he had but he, Shannon, was certainly not going to suggest it to him. Let him find out the hard way. Back in the twentieth century, radio astronomy had

been an interesting development but without any hard application. Now they could use it to pinpoint their position in space with an accuracy of millionths of a light-year.

The attentive voice broke in on his thoughts. "I'm sorry, sir, there seems to be some kind of electrical storm. We've never seen anything like it on this route. At the moment we can't get any kind of fix."

Shannon felt the need to explain, however slightly.

"We're slightly off the route at the moment, the interference will probably clear up quite shortly. Please let me know when it does."

The voice seemed satisfied with this explanation, then, just as the conversation appeared to be finished, it said, "Sir, one of my operators has just told me that we've lost contact with Vega Three and with ships in this area."

Shannon said, quickly, "Yes, it's probably a general black-out, keep me informed."

He put the phone down. The weight of twenty years experience in space couldn't blanket the first glimmerings of fear that began to twist his bowels. Until now, he had not worried too much about being off course. If the worst came to the worst, they could still broadcast the interstellar distress call. But, if the radio communication was blacked-out, they were completely alone. Even if there were a hundred ships in the vicinity, it would be as if they, and the *Achilles*, didn't exist. And radio was blacked-out.

He got up and left the cabin. As he made his way toward the flight deck, he wondered if Benson had made any progress. Without the help of radio and automatic navigators, the job of navigating was reduced, Shannon smiled at the simplification, to a process of dead-reckoning. Back to the early days of the twentieth century, when the navigator's equipment consisted of a chart, some simple instruments and a sharp pencil. A line drawn across the map, an allowance for drift, and there you were.

In space, the problem was slightly more complicated. There was an extra dimension, to start with. Up and down, as well as left and right. Then there was the problem of the points of departure and arrival. Both were moving, and on a circular course. On top of all that, every star in the galaxy seemed to be trying to pull a ship off course. The gravitational fields of

the star systems, varying with distance and mass, produced a combination of attraction that was unique to each point in space.

Only a machine could hope to solve all these problems, and such a machine was the autonav. This was a direct descendant of the inertial navigation systems used in the first atomic submarines. No matter where the ship was in space, the autonav always knew exactly where it was in relation to its starting-point, Earth. To go from one planet to another, it was merely necessary to feed in taped instructions to the autonav regarding the route to be followed. The autonav compared the instructions with its own knowledge of the ship's position at any moment, and guided the ship accordingly.

Shannon was beginning to feel sorry for Benson, the task he had set him was incredibly difficult. But Shannon knew that, if he showed the sympathy he felt, Benson would admit defeat that much sooner. As he reached the flight deck, Shannon assumed an air of quiet confidence that he was far from feeling, but which, he knew, was expected of him by his young officers. Even if the ship blew up, he would be expected to radiate cool assurance.

As he entered the room he was not surprised to see Benson bending over the chart table. He walked over and stood beside him. "Well, Mr. Benson, what's our new course for Earth?"

Benson straightened wearily. "I think I've looked at every chart on the microfilm library, but there's nothing that even approaches this region. I don't know how I'm going to find a course out of this wilderness."

"You've got to, otherwise we'll be stuck out here for ever."

"But surely, sir, if it comes to that, we can send out a distress—"

"I'm afraid we can't. We're in an area of intense radio interference. We're completely on our own."

Benson's face was white. "But, sir, that means—"

Shannon was firm. "That means, Mr. Benson, that we're going to have to think our way out. For every problem there is an answer. I mean to find that answer. By the way, has Mr. Evans checked the autonav?"

"Yes, sir, he thinks the tape has been tampered with, he's taken it to the workshop to make sure."

" Tampered with ! By whom ? Better ask Mr. Evans to step up here."

As Benson moved across to the mike, Evans appeared in the doorway, a spool of tape in his hand.

" Ah, Mr. Evans, what's this I hear about the tape being tampered with. Are you sure ?"

Evans was a dark, wiry man. Sure of himself, he advanced into the room and held out the spool to Shannon. " Yes, sir, at the point where we left the route, the tape has been partially erased. I don't know how or why, but—"

Shannon looked at him in amazement. " Erased ? I can't believe it !"

Evans nodded. " Afraid so, sir. It looks like poor maintenance on Vega Three, to me."

Shannon turned the spool in his hands, allowing some of the tape to spill over. It looked perfectly normal but the error was magnetic, invisible.

He offered it back to Evans. " Will you show me where the erasure is ?"

" Yes, sir." Evans began to thread the tape into the autonav. " I've marked the place." He pressed a button on the console and the tape wound itself on to the take-up spool at high speed. When the two spools were showing almost the same amount of tape, Evans stopped them and found the yellow marks he had made.

" Here we are, sir, the erasure is between the two marks."

Shannon looked at the distance between the marks. " About four inches, what does that represent in distance, Mr. Benson?"

Benson considered. " At our normal speed—about twenty-three light-years, sir."

Shannon nodded. " Yes, I think that's about right, which means that if, for some reason, you hadn't done your four-hourly, the ship would have probably—"

" I see what you're getting at, sir." Benson's face showed his excitement. " The ship would have probably come back to the proper course."

Shannon smiled at him. " Well, go on Mr. Benson, is there a solution to our problem ?"

Benson hesitated. " I think so, sir. If we set the tape going again at the second mark, the ship will return to the route somewhere ahead of where she left it."

" Sounds almost too easy," Shannon agreed. " Still, it's the logical way. Let's get started, shall we ?"

Benson walked over to the main control console, then glanced at Evans. Evans set the tape at the second mark and nodded to Benson.

Benson pressed the START GENERATORS button. He had to wait for the generators to reach their operating speed so he concentrated his attention on the speed indicators.

Shannon walked over and stood beside him. As they watched, the indicators climbed up the scale and reached the required level. Then they climbed past the mark up into the red, overspeed zone.

Benson reacted automatically. He switched off and glanced at the Captain. In answer to Shannon's raised eyebrows, he said, "It's the generators, sir, they're overspeeding. I just don't understand—" His voice trailed off.

Shannon frowned. Two major faults on one journey was a little too much, even for him. He looked round at Evans. "Looks like your department, Mr. Evans."

As Evans came over to the console, Shannon stood aside to make room for him. Evans checked that all the switches were in their proper positions, then pressed the start button.

The three men watched the speed indicators intently as they rose to the START DRIVE mark. Then, as before, they moved steadily upward, reaching the red band that spelt danger.

Evans shook his head and tried several more times. At last, he turned to Shannon. "I shall have to check the speed regulators, looks as if they're jammed."

"Carry on then, please, we must get the ship moving as soon as possible."

Evans spoke through clenched teeth. "When, and if, we get back to Earth, I shall have a few words to say about those so-called maintenance people on Vega Three. First the tape, now the regulators—I'd better go and check them."

When he had gone, Shannon lowered his bulk into a chair. He suddenly felt weak. As he waited for Evans to report back, he reviewed the situation in a new light. If the faults they had experienced were indeed due to poor servicing on Vega Three, what else would they find wrong? He had a mental picture of the complicated array of instruments and machines that were the vitals of the ship. He shuddered to think of the unknown faults that could be lurking in every console, in every 'black box,' in the miles of wiring that made up the ship's nervous system.

Shannon thanked his stars that he carried no passengers on this ship. It would have been very difficult to have to explain how they came to be hanging in the middle of nowhere, when they should have been over halfway to Earth. He realised that it was going to be even more difficult to tell the crew, the least of whom knew that the ship practically navigated herself under normal conditions. And conditions were always normal, until now!

He looked up questioningly as Evans reappeared. Evans spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "It's no good, sir, the regulators are fused in the closed position. They must have fused as the generators slowed down after we had finished with retro-drive. I'm afraid we'll have to juggle things a bit."

"Juggle things a bit? How do you mean, Mr. Evans?"

"Well, sir, I've been thinking. All we need to do is to keep the generators running at about the proper speed so that we can operate the drive, but only until we reach our cruise velocity, which shouldn't take more than just over an hour."

Shannon was cautious. "Agreed. But how do you propose to achieve all this?"

Evans moved to the main console. "If I may show you, sir?"

Shannon got up and stood near the console. "Go ahead."

Evans pressed the start button and the speed indicators rose obediently. As they slid past the mark, Evans pressed the stop button, and they sank once more. Immediately, Evans pressed the start button and the sequence began again. After a minute of this, Evans was able to anticipate the movements of the needles and he achieved a fair degree of stability. He turned to Shannon, "It's a bit crude, sir, but there's nothing else we can do."

Shannon couldn't help smiling. "I agree, it's not the best operating practice, but I think it may get us home. I suggest that you get a couple of your engineers up here to do the juggling, they'll need some practice, first."

"Right, sir." Evans left the flight deck.

To Benson, Shannon said, "Once the engineers can keep the generators at a reasonably constant speed, you can cut in the main drive. Let's hope they don't fuse the panel with their button-pushing."

He waited impatiently until the Chief Engineer returned with two sleepy-eyed colleagues. He watched as Evans showed

them how to manipulate the buttons. If they thought it odd, they gave no sign.

Soon, Evans seemed satisfied. "I think we're ready now, sir."

Shannon nodded. "Carry on, please."

Benson moved to the side of the man who had chosen to start the button-pushing. He watched the indicators carefully until they appeared to be almost stationary. He drew a deep breath and gently pushed the main drive control through the gate. He transferred his attention to the ship velocity indicator and saw it rising slowly, agonisingly, up the scale.

The tension on the flight deck mounted. Shannon could see the sweat standing out on the faces of the men at the console. After half-an-hour, the velocity had reached half that normally used. Shannon was beginning to think they were out of the wood when an alarm bell shrilled its urgent message. A red light flashed intermittently over the control console.

Shannon started forward and then felt the effects of acceleration. For a moment, he couldn't grasp the situation. The effects of normal acceleration were taken care of by an artificial field generated within the ship. It was taken for granted.

Now, he felt himself being pulled toward the rear bulkhead and he realised that the acceleration was beyond that for which the ship was designed.

He caught a glimpse of the engineer who had been doing the button-pushing, nursing his fingers as though he had been burned. He saw Evans throw himself at the console. Then he found himself slithering towards the bulkhead. He tried to stop himself but a red flash of pain exploded in his head.

As he came round, he found himself on the couch that was normally used by the officer on night duty. He tried to remember what had happened, but the aching of his head seemed more pressing.

Evans was standing over him, concern in his face.

"How are you feeling, sir?"

Shannon put a hand up to his head. "Lousy, what happened?"

"Well, sir, I'm afraid my idea didn't quite work out. The fuse blew on the panel and threw my man off with burnt fingers. Looks as though he didn't have time to press the 'off' button. The result was that the generators nearly tore themselves out of their mountings. I just managed to switch off the whole panel in time. But not before the drive reacted beyond

its limit. The acceleration was enormous and the field couldn't take it. Anyway, we've sorted it out now."

Shannon felt as though nothing mattered but the ache in his head, but he had to know. "The acceleration—what's our speed—are we back on course?"

Evans glanced over at Benson. "I think Mr. Benson can tell you better than I, sir."

Benson came and stood near the couch. He looked tired but confident.

"Well, it worked, sir. We're back on the route. Trouble is, we're now moving at nearly twice our usual speed for this run. This will make up the time we spent off track, but—we've no way of slowing down, the generators are completely useless."

Shannon stroked his jaw thoughtfully. If they couldn't slow the ship in time, they would meet Earth at a speed of several light-years an hour, the autonav would carry out its instructions to the end. He shuddered. They needed help.

"How are radio conditions, now?"

"All clear now, sir."

"Good. Get off a radiogram to Earthport and explain the situation. We'll need something about cruiser size to meet us as soon as possible. Once it can match our speed we can use the antigravs to hook on to it and then, I hope, it can slow us both down. Off you go then, Mr. Benson."

"Right, sir." Benson was already on his way.

Shannon glanced at Evans. "I'd like a formal report on the equipment failures we've had, with your comments on how they could have occurred."

Evans nodded. "Very good, sir."

Shannon watched him go, then gingerly eased himself to a sitting position. His head still throbbed but he tried to ignore it. He had a lot to think about. He was beginning to form his own opinions on the cause of their troubles. The maintenance engineers on Vega Three were responsible for the servicing of the ship before lift-off. Only they had access to the vital systems, and only they could be held responsible for failure, either by neglect or design.

Shannon could think of no reason for sabotage. The Vegans were much too dependent on Earth trade. Either way, he was going to have a lot to say to Blane, the Line Manager, when they reached Earth.

He stood up, then wished he hadn't. He steadied himself and walked toward the door. As he reached it he met Benson.

"I'm going to my cabin, Mr. Benson. Let me know the reply from Earth, as soon as it comes in."

Shannon walked slowly back to his cabin, turning over in his mind the report he intended to write in his log, with particular reference to the maintenance facilities on Vega Three.

A week later, the *Achilles* was within two million miles of Earth. A few feet below her belly, a Fleet Cruiser hung on invisible magnetic beams. The cruiser's retro-drive worked at full blast, slowing both ships to a safe speed for the final approach.

Captain Shannon was watching the main viewscreen intently because, almost filling it, was the blue sphere of Earth. He swallowed the lump in his throat and turned as a messenger came in and handed him a small envelope. He opened it and took out the slip of paper. With raised eyebrows, he read the radiogram.

PERSONAL FOR CAPTAIN SHANNON, S.F.

ACHILLES

CONGRATULATIONS YOUR SUCCESSFUL
JOURNEY STOP PLEASE COME AND SEE ME ON
ARRIVAL STOP REGARDS STOP BLANE

Shannon stared at the message. It didn't make sense. Blane was not given to congratulating captains on completion of their journeys, especially routine freight runs. Shannon wondered what Blane would have signalled had he known the sort of trip they had just had. Hardly routine, Shannon thought grimly. Certainly he would go and see Blane. He had a few things to say to that planet-bound gentleman.

A thousand miles out from Earth, the *Achilles* and her escort parted company. Shannon signalled his thanks to the commander of the cruiser. He was glad of the small chemical rockets that helped them to manoeuvre near the surface, at least they didn't depend on the generators.

Gracefully, the long, sleek ship lowered herself to the concrete and measured her length against the operations buildings she dwarfed.

As soon as he could decently get away, Shannon left the ship and strode swiftly to the administration building. Armed with

his log-book, he marched into Blane's office, hardly bothering to knock.

Blane looked up at him through a haze of cigar smoke. "Welcome home, Captain." He waved a fat hand vaguely in the direction of a comfortable chair. "Cigar, Captain?"

Shannon was determined not to be swayed from his course.

"Now look here, Blane. It's all very well for you to sit there in your cosy chair and say 'Welcome home, Captain, have a cigar, Captain.' Do you know what kind of a trip I've had? In all my service I've never seen such poor maintenance on any planet. One damned thing after another went wrong. I—"

Blane's pudgy hand flew up. "Please, Captain, calm yourself. I know very well what sort of trip you've had. After all, I arranged it."

Shannon thought his ears were playing him tricks. "You did what?"

"I arranged it. Please let me explain. You know as well as I do that the crews of today are hardly more than machine minders. Without a machine to help them, they're like lost sheep. We, that is, the Directors and I, are becoming worried about this attitude. What would happen if one of our liners were to have equipment failure in deep space, with a couple of thousand passengers on board? So we thought up a little test. Your ship was the guinea pig. We arranged for the route tape to be partially erased to put you off course. We assumed that you would stop the ship once you discovered the error, so we arranged for the regulators to jam after you had used the retro-drive. The whole thing was meant to appear as a genuine emergency."

Shannon seethed with anger. "As far as I'm concerned, it was a genuine emergency. When we found the error, we also found ourselves in the middle of an electrical storm, we couldn't have called for help if we'd wanted to. And surely, you could have put me in the picture. After all, I am responsible for the safety of the ship and her crew."

Blane nodded. "We did consider it, naturally, but we decided against it on the grounds that you might not have acted normally in the circumstances."

Shannon refused to be mollified. "Don't you think you were taking a big risk with the lives of sixty men, not to mention your precious ship?"

Blane was affronted. " You underestimate us, Captain. We took the most stringent precautions to ensure your safety. A Fleet Cruiser had you under surveillance throughout your journey. At no time were you further than five light-years from help, if you needed it."

" And how were we supposed to call for help in a radio black-out? "

Blane looked uncomfortable. " I'll admit, we hadn't considered the possibility of your losing radio communication, but the cruiser was there, here's the proof."

Blane picked up a paper from his desk and offered it to Shannon.

Shannon took the paper, and read the printed message.

FROM : FLEETBASE VEGA THREE

TO : MANAGER STARLINES EARTHPORT

COPY : FLEET COMMANDER

SUBJECT : NAVIGATIONAL ESCORT FOR SPACE-FREIGHTER ACHILLES STOP

CRUISER LIGHTSTAR LIFTED OFF FOUR HOURS AFTER ACHILLES STOP LIGHTSTAR REPORTS GOOD RADAR CONTACT WHEN ACHILLES APPROX TEN LIGHT YEARS OFF ROUTE ALTHOUGH EXPERIENCING INCREASING INTERFERENCE STOP

ENDS

Shannon put the message back on Blane's desk. He had to admit that Blane was right, precautions had been taken.

" I'm sorry, Blane, but it has been a rough trip, and my nerves—"

There was a brisk knock at the door which opened to admit a young man carrying a slip of paper.

" Sorry to burst in, sir, this has just come in, emergency."

Blane took the paper from the young man and dismissed him. He glanced at the paper and turned pale. Nervously, he handed the slip to Shannon.

" Looks as though I should be the one to apologize."

Shannon read the message. He could almost feel sympathy for Blane.

EMERGENCY

FROM : FLEETBASE VEGA THREE

TO : MANAGER STARLINES EARTHPORT

COPY : FLEET COMMANDER

SUBJECT : NAVIGATIONAL ESCORT FOR SPACE-FREIGHTER ACHILLES STOP
 LIGHTSTAR REPORTS UNABLE FOLLOW ACHILLES DUE COMPLETE RADIO BLACKOUT STOP EXTENSIVE SEARCH ABORTIVE STOP LIGHTSTAR RETURNING THIS BASE STOP SEARCH AND RESCUE ORGANISATION ALERTED STOP REQUEST CONSIDER CANCELLATION ESCORT DUTY STOP
 ENDS

Shannon smiled at Blane. He said gently, "I suggest that you cancel this, and any other escort duty you have in mind. I think you can trust your crews, don't you?"

Peter Vaughan

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

A few issues ago, Russ Markham introduced Lola and Ellis Hunter and Kim and Dave Laing of the Galactic Union Survey, in a story entitled "Who Went Where?" Next month the team return in a new story "Inductive Reaction," in which they are set to solve another enigmatic happening on an alien world. Short stories should include "Aqueduct" by Francis G. Rayer, "Bottomless Pit" by Philip E. High and the promised short story from our recent Australian Guest Editor, John Baxter, making his debut with "Eviction."

Lan Wright's serial "Dawn's Left Hand," comes to a dramatic climax with an unexpected twist in its solution. All in all, an issue you will not want to miss.

Short story ratings for No. 122 were :

1. The Streets Of Ashkalon	-	-	-	Harry Harrison
2. The Craving for Blackness	-	-	-	Robert Ray
3. Crack Of Doom (Part 1)	-	-	-	John Brunner
4. Serpent In Paradise	-	-	-	Morris Nagel
5. Pandora's Box	-	-	-	Steve Hall
6. Moon Beam	-	-	-	David Rome

It was a logical, scientific type of vampire ; an inhabitant of an alien world. It liked blood—and apparently could not be killed.

Pet Name For A World

by GORDON WALTERS

I can imagine its beginning, as I remember its end, on that ghastly planet Angstrom Veema. There would be a chilling morning mist clinging to the edge of the forest, blending the greens of the different leaves into a single, almost colourless shade.

The mist suddenly swirls. Flashes of alien colours break through the monotony as an exhausted human being blunders through the undergrowth.

His legs are as flimsy as columns of jelly melting in the sun. The veins supplying them seem to have run dry of power, of co-ordination—as they have of blood. His head is empty, dizzy, the face pale even in the glow of the rising sun.

And somewhere near, a hideous, invisible monster must be fluttering through the trees, or creeping along the ground. But there is no sign of its existence save the condition of the man.

He staggers into the clearing where the ship leans slightly on the soft ground. The comfortable, human ship made on comfortable, human Earth. Somebody has seen him—an alert lookout man. The alarm shrieks through the mist, almost dispersing it. The man—I found out that his name was Jackson—may or may not have heard it, for his ears are like cotton wool. They must be, with so little blood to sensitise the diaphragms. But enough sound—tickling fragments—

must get through, to tell him that he need struggle no longer, can sink to the ground, the ground that is now a doorstep.

The euphoric doorstep to unconsciousness.

For me it started on Earth several months later. I was going through an easy period, murderers were choosing blunt instruments rather than subtle poisons, and nobody required my knowledge for anything more interesting than the routine extermination of a few rats.

The two meticulously uniformed agents radiated A1 with, incredibly, a bored, languid manner. As well they might. They had obviously contacted hundreds of people for the Extraterrestrial Survey Bureau, and the way they answered my "What in hell could they want me for?" smoothly and without giving a thing away confirmed the idea.

"We've had to use some most unusual people. For instance, we once collared a bank clerk for a mapping expedition merely because he had a photographic memory. Once having seen a place, he could describe it with hundred per cent accuracy. And there was . . ."

Between reminiscences, they rushed me aboard an air rocket for London. I knew the job would be important, and spent the first part of the journey in silence, trying to figure out why an interstellar organisation should want a man whose profession had absolutely nothing to do with alien planets. As I tried to think of a reason, I felt the first quiet aches of nausea rising in that no-man's land of emotion between the stomach and the throat. Then a body of fear rushed upon me with a torrent of thoughts. The implications of those three simple words—Extraterrestrial Survey Bureau—jostled through my mind.

I bit them down with my teeth, deliberately started a conversation about the destruction of vermin.

Some people were born with stardust quickening their heels, but others, like myself, were so firmly rooted to Earth we might have been plants. Many people tremble under the night sky, but only from the mythology of ghosts and vampires. For some, the facts of alien beings and alien worlds, learned not around the campfires but from biological journals, were worse than the most malignant demon.

The bravest man in the world, to me, was a member of a Final Survey Team. Dumped out in the open, equipped to deal with the menaces unearthed by the main survey, his job was to

attract the last ten per cent. Viruses. Rare and hostile creatures.

The astonishing thing was that there were plenty of men who enjoyed being bait.

I shuddered.

"We're here."

In the bright lights of the Bureau building, my fear vanished. We hurried through a series of offices, each one a little more lavish, until we came to one headed PERSONNEL—EMERGENCY.

I went in—and stopped dead!

"Joe! What are you doing here?"

And we were pumping each other's hands and slapping each other's shoulders. At last, Joe Schneider said: "I'm no longer fit for an F. S. Team. But my experience has landed me this job—and it's interesting enough to keep me from yearning too much to get back into the field. Though I wouldn't say no if they asked . . ." he added.

"Any chance of your getting clear of trigesic?" I said, though the question was unnecessary. I knew as well as anyone that trigesic—a combination of a potent morphine-type analgesic with several psycho-therapeutic drugs, was incurably addictive. Subconsciously, my eyes were passing over Joe's face, noting the pin-point pupils which told me he was carrying enough of the drug in his veins to kill a football team—and the reserves. And whilst an addict, he couldn't qualify as a Suicide Man. He was no longer physiologically normal.

I didn't give him time to answer. "What do you want me for?"

"A job. Naturally, it is voluntary, but I needn't emphasise that it is very important."

"Go on."

"You've heard of Angstrom Veema, of course?"

I shook my head.

"Still Earthbound, eh? It doesn't matter. But Angstrom Veema's the ridiculous name given to Earth's latest hope for a colony. She is an ideal place on which to dump a few billion folk in every respect, save one."

"Inevitably there's a snag," Flippancy is a good way to keep the imagination down.

"That is why they want you on Angstrom Veema. The Survey Chief there, Brockbank, has to poison an alien creature

which is causing a lot of trouble, and for some reasons he couldn't explain in a short message, the whole future of a colony depends on it. The menace is a kind of vampire, apparently, but not the familiar old Carpathian variety. No cloaks flapping in the midnight wind, or graves opening on blood-oiled hinges.

"But, unfortunately, it *does* have some of Dracula's special effects. It has never been seen, nor detected by any of the usual methods. Hence, it can't be shot, and isn't amenable to traps. In fact, if it wasn't for the fact that it eats solid material, I would identify it as a gaseous alien . . . It must be incredibly cunning.

"The funny thing about it—it has taken one hell of a liking for Terran food. Its metabolism, they've proved, is identical to man's. It eats the same food as we do—and instinctively realises it's wasting its molars on grass. There's one exception: it drinks blood."

"Blood is digestable by man," I said. "It's just that we don't go in for it."

"Exactly! The whole affair is set up for us to poison it—and to do that most effectively, they want an expert on *terrestrial* toxins, not aliens. I immediately thought of you. You might regard yourself as a backwoods forensic officer, detecting arsenic in rich old women's tea, but there's nobody on Earth who knows more about poisoning than you."

I sat back, relieved.

It would be an easy job. There were plenty of ways of poisoning animals—foolproof ways which even the most sensitive nose or tongue couldn't detect, until it was too late for anything but a last, violent attempt to regurgitate the poison. I was already beginning to think in terms of one of the dicoumarol derivatives, the long-acting one. It had always appealed to me as being particularly subtle. An anti-coagulant, as soon as its victim cut itself, it would make it bleed to death. I could even hasten the process by putting some harmless, but abrasive substance in with the food, which would cut it internally.

I said: "I won't even have to leave Earth."

"You will. Your experience in extermination must have showed you there is more to killing a hedgehog than slapping strychnine in its bowl of milk."

I nodded. Even as I began to imagine Angstrom Veema with its myriad horrors I was shaking Joe's hand, saying: "I will

go. It is my duty—and I don't suppose I'll have to leave the ship much."

Joe smiled, but it was not a smile of humour. Rather, it held sadness. "They're not fools. They've tried several poisons. The creature has refused to touch any of them. *Cunning?*" He leant forward. "They think there's something more than *cunning*."

I hoped to God I could take it.

The ship settled down several hundred yards from the Survey ship. While we waited the long hour before they opened the airlocks, I slowly and deliberately read a book, on lethal dosage variations. I kept the ports of my cabin closed, but even through the opaque plastic I could feel the alien world. At last—and my heart leapt like a man in the throes of an epileptic fit—I heard steps. An Angstrom Veemite—I already thought of Brockbank's men as natives—shook my hand. Another took my bags.

"Shall we go?"

I followed quickly, doing my best to ignore my surroundings, and imagine they were part of Earth. But even so, several hundred yards on alien soil under an alien set of stars threatened to become several miles. Under my feet, a strange, resilient mat of grass harboured evil to eat through the two soles of my feet; over my head, more monsters . . .

Only *one* soul as armour . . .

"*What a pun!*" I laughed. It must have been a cackle of hysteria. The Angstrom Veemites clutched my arms. God—that pun, so bad—they are sure to kill me!

My head rang suddenly, as one of them slapped me. Then, incredibly gently, my right arm was pointed at the night sky.

A gentle voice murmured, like a soothing brook of cotton wool, "See those stars? The two very bright ones, an inch or so apart?"

I saw them.

"And between them? That very faint one?"

"Yes."

"That is the sun. Old Sol herself."

"Yes." Not like the others, but soft and friendly.

"You see—even here, a hundred parsecs distant from Sol, she still shines down on you as she does on Earth."

"I—guess so." He was right. The sun shines on even the furthest world, if you have eyes to see it. And, God, my eyes

were changing that point of light to her golden orb as it shone on an English June.

A harp began to play. For a second, it blended with the soft summer sun, then it set my ear-bone to resonating with a dreadful vibration which spread to my other bones and into my nerves.

"Quick ! To the ground !" The men were suddenly blurs of action. A great white light—belonging to a beamer—flamed the sky and focussed on a flying shape which was driving towards us. It washed the vibrations from my body. I lay shivering, as the beamer died and darkness replaced the glare. A burning smell crowded in with the darkness.

I felt spasms in my legs and arms thrust me to my feet and send me running. I ran, leapt, stumbled, rolled—anywhere to get away from the smell and the whole planet Angstrom Veema.

Then a vast, tanned fist loomed towards my chin, contacted with a gigantic ache. Arms caught me, and . . .

No more.

I felt wonderful. As I sat in front of Brockbank's desk, I revelled in a feeling I had never experienced before. And the thought that I was now a drug addict as a result of the psychiatric treatment they gave me held only a tiny backroom in my mind. Hell, so what ? It might have been a social disgrace a century ago, but now, some people in some circumstances have to be drug addicts.

Addict is a bad word.

Like a diabetic has to have a daily injection of insulin, I had to have two injections of trigesic ; one in the morning and one at night.

Enough of philosophising, I told myself. I have a job to do. I listened to Brockbank filling in the background.

"We have made one or two attempts to arrange poisoned food for the vampire, but it has refused to touch it every time, at the same time gobbling up identical but untampered food nearby. It obviously possesses a keen sense of detection. A unique sense of detection . . ."

I shook my head. "Smell, most probably. *Possibly* appearance. But not taste, as you say there is no sign of it being sampled and spat out. And certainly not a sixth sense as you imply." I quoted some examples of terrestrial animals possessing such a refined sense of smell that their rejection of

tampered food was almost supernatural. "It's simply a question of overcoming this talent. The background, if you please. How many men, for instance, do you have trying to attract the last ten per cent of a world's menaces?"

Brockbank's eyes gleamed. "I know what you're thinking. We have twenty-four, when, of course, they're all fit. The vampire regularly takes blood from one man a night, never more. This suggests that the vampires are very rare."

He patted a thick file of notes. "See them? That is a part of what we have learned about this world—the part pertaining to the vampire. In it there is incorporated a theory that there is only one vampire." He patted another, much thinner pile. "Outside it, there is another theory; it is this second theory, product of imagination rather than facts, that makes us ignore the suggestion implicit in the first that, with only one vampire, why bother to exterminate it?

"I'll give you the background." He laughed. "I've taken long enough getting round to it."

The cabin was quiet, save for the soughing of the ventilators.

"This planet possesses, first, a high degree of volcanic activity and, second, beneath the surface, there are large radioactive deposits. Two or three years before we came here there was an eruption which hurled a lot of radioactive materials into the air. This area, though many miles from the eruption, received the brunt of the fallout. Prevailing winds must have been the cause. The result was that there have been quite a number of mutants which survived their birth. We have captured several.

"More strangely, several of these mutants had two or three things in common. One is that they appear to be immortal—read the notes sometime to find the reasons for so supposing. But more important: we have never succeeded in poisoning a single one of these. Like the vampire, which we've taken to be another product of the fallout. The third oddity is that they are irresistibly attracted to Terran food, and eat it avidly, so long as it hasn't been tampered with."

The second item was the most interesting. "The normal progenitors of the mutants?"

"We can poison them as easily as rats."

I said: "Radioactivity giving an infinitely increased sense of detections of toxins? Sounds incredible, but . . ." I shrugged.

The buoyancy of the trigesic was going slowly. For a few hours I would feel normal, then it would be time for another injection.

Pointing through the open port, I asked, "What's the point of getting rid of the vampire? Even if your second theory has more sinister connotations, even if there were more than one, a few simple precautions would protect any colonists."

"There is no protection against this creature, save an hermetically sealed ship. It has succeeded in entering every type of test accomodation, and we have devised no method of keeping it out."

Brockbank's hands began to tremble slightly. He was frightened.

"If its blood sucking were all, we wouldn't be bothered. But that is not all. It is horribly alien . . ."

He stopped. I couldn't repress a mental chuckle that this seasoned explorer was afraid of the unknown whilst I was taking it calmly. Trigesic was certainly the answer.

"It's appetite is increasing. At first, the volumes of blood taken were fairly small. Then they increased, until now it has started attacking two victims during a night. It is growing. And human blood is the only substance which makes it grow at an appreciable rate. We have deduced this from our captive mutants—they only increase in size significantly when blood is served them. Apparently—and you'll find the evidence in those notes as well—the mutants when born grow only just so far, then their growth is averted. Terran food, to a minute extent, and blood starts them growing again. We think that there is a hormone in blood which does it."

Brockbank suddenly slammed his fist into the desk.

"And more than growth! Development! They're changing. Changing in ways not one of us has found any reason for. The mutants we have—mostly small, and all fairly harmless—cause us no fear. We can easily catch them. But the cunning vampire . . . We think it came from the harp-birds, and you know what they're like . . ."

His thoughts were wandering. What the hell could that second theory be? Why didn't he get to the point? But I said: "My welcoming committee."

"Doctor Harrison has suggested the possibility that . . ."

The door opened. An elderly man rushed in, whispered urgently to Brockbank. The director went white, seemed about to faint. After a moment, he pulled himself together and

punched a button. His voice was loud and strong as it broad-cast the order :

“ All Final Survey Team members will return to the ship ! ”

Then he turned to me. “ If we want this planet for human beings to settle, you have to kill that creature. Doctor Harrison reports that two of the mutants which we have fed on blood have now subdivided—reproduced like amoeba.”

The Director insisted I was wasting my time using the traditional approach, but when I challenged him to suggest a different one, he sighed and let me continue. “ I guess it was only a hunch,” he said.

“ In any case, this approach may suggest others when I see a few of the results,” I assured him, but it was all air, as they say. The only possible approach is disguising the poison. I had several substances in mind, both organic and inorganic, which would fit the bill. Both odourless and tasteless, I thought it unlikely that the vampire would spot them. In addition, I could incorporate the poison in a highly spiced food like an Indian curry—assuming that the vampire could be persuaded to eat Oriental foods.

“ It’ll probably lap it up,” Brockbank laughed. His attitude had changed completely. “ Now you see why we brought you along. We are novices in the art of poisoning. It is rather a pity that Cesare Borgia wasn’t living now. You would have made a perfect team.”

Flattery—it was merely a question of the amount of disguise. The curry was serving both as armour plating and the hypothetical force field.

“ You’ll soon have a dead vampire,” I said.

That was a very premature thing to say.

I arranged with one of the Indian members of the Survival Team to cook up a good curry, and to make it as strong as possible.

It was excellent, and I confess I ate some of it myself. Then I placed little dishes of it in front of the mutants in their cages. Most self-respecting animals, I guessed, would take one bite and run for the nearest bowl of water, but, surprisingly, they all ate it with evident gusto. Strange creatures, they varied in size and shape very considerably, even more than their ancestors had done. Oddly, they didn’t make me shudder ; I merely wondered how different the vampire was from the harp

bird it probably stemmed from. About the same size, probably —the size of a man. A dose of poison that would kill a man should suffice, then.

Having found they liked the curry, I tried them with second helpings, but with a poison included. No delicate odour or flavour could possibly make itself felt on nerve endings against the powerful spices. The creature that could detect a poison through that lot could spot droplets of distilled water in a saline ocean.

But they did. They refused to touch the poisoned curry. I tried, naturally, leaving the food out for the vampire, in the hope that it might, by sheer chance, miss the toxin. But things like that only happen in fiction. It liked the curry, but . . .

During the next couple of days I went through a whole range of poisons, but at last I had to admit defeat. I laughed bitterly at Brockbank. "It's just impossible. It's almost as though they *know* we are trying to poison them, and know in which sample the poison lies." I was on edge. It was getting near the time for my injection. I was now on the maximum dosage ; had reached the plateau. They wouldn't need any more increasing, but neither would I be able to reduce them. It was becoming a bit of a nuisance.

"Ready to believe in a sixth sense, yet ?"

"I'm ready to believe anything. If you could call instinct a sense, that would be it."

"Exactly ! Instinct ! Suppose you could explain instinct as a kind of subconscious telepathy, which enables the mutants to 'read' the purpose behind the food given to them. We give it breakfast, fully intending to keep its body and soul together, and it gobbles it down happily. But we give it something designed to part those two essentials of life, and it knows there is poison. So it leaves it alone.

"If we could find a way of preventing the creature from finding out that we are *trying* to poison it, then we'll succeed."

I was forced to admit he was probably right, and the more I thought about it, the more convinced I was. "We could prepare the poison at a distance, outside the range of its pickup apparatus."

"What distance is that ?"

"Not very far," I said.

"Besides," Brockbank went on relentlessly, "it doesn't matter. It would be left for the vampire by someone who would know it was poisoned."

"Even if we removed everybody into space, and sent down unsuspecting crewman with instructions to feed the nice animals."

"We haven't any spare crewmen, unfortunately. They all know we are trying to kill the vampire. And the thought would be in the man's mind that this is the way we are doing it, even if we didn't explain it to him."

"Even if we fed him a lie?"

"Could you convince him we've suddenly had altruistic thoughts towards the thing?"

I shook my head. We glared at each other, hating each other for not thinking of the way out. Then Brockbank's hands whipped towards the bookshelves, snatched a heavy volume.

"You've got an idea."

He ignored me, thumbing through the pages. He found what he was looking for, sat down. Read the passage once, then, I could see by the movements of his eyes, a second time.

"Well," I asked.

He shook his head. "There can be no way out. Some researchers in telepathy have proved that telepathy has no range limits. I remembered something about it—and here it is, in black and white!"

Then, so softly that it scarcely ruffled the still air :

"We have lost a world."

Through the port, the alien world of Angstrom Veema leered at me, with a single vampire somewhere ruling it. Until it died—which due to its immortality, was probably never—it prevented mankind settling there. With no blood, at least its growth and reproduction was arrested. But if man settled, it would multiply.

And Angstrom Veema would remain a set of co-ordinates and two short names which were for identification purposes only. Never would it become known affectionately by a shortened form, like Angie . . .

From somewhere came my chuckle.

Brockbank must have recognised the signs. "Your injection," he snapped. I took the syringe, feeling slightly strange, but still rational. Withdrawal symptoms were close,

but not yet taking a grip. I injected myself. Immediately, the familiar buzzing, then, once more, I felt on top of the world.

Brockbank slapped me on the shoulder, trying to hide his disappointment. "We'll be back on Earth soon. I've decided to blast-off tomorrow. There's no point staying. You'll be glad, eh ?"

"Glad ! Sure ! I've been looking forward to the day . . ." I looked out of the port. Angstrom Veema winked back at me. "Angie," I whispered.

Then she beckoned.

I shouted—or the trigesic ordered me to : "I'm going out there tonight. I'm going to be an F.S.T. man, and wear the medal !"

And I went. Brockbank protested. He would. I wouldn't serve any useful purpose. I might kill myself. So ?

I *had* to spend a night out there alone ! I would give Joe the surprise of his life when I got back to Earth. I'd take a picture, and show it him !

As I said—I went. Took a tent, weapons, food, means of keeping warm. A camp bed—"Nothing special, Brocky old fellow. I want to live like the toughest of them."

It was glorious. I felt the cool of the wind against my cheeks. It whispered round my nostrils and sent delicate touches of strange, wonderful fragrances inside.

It was becoming a compensation for having to leave Angie. A kind of last fling for Earthmen.

I inhaled and exhaled—it was wonderful ! And sounds, too, reached me. Creatures here hunting, there trying to escape. Somewhere, too, was the vampire, the mutant of the harp birds. Maybe it would come to suck my blood. Well, I had to leave a part of me behind. A dog leaves a part of him on every tree he passes—why not me ?

It came when you slept, and didn't hurt you. Afterwards, you just felt weak. What a contrast to its parents, which howled savagely through the air !

I put the bed down and made it. I suddenly felt dreadfully, yet splendidly tired. I had spent several hours experiencing Angie, and sleep would come as the climax. I expanded my lungs, relaxed my muscles, and let myself merge fully with Angstrom Veema.

Angie !

The harp spanged, shattered my eardrums. A leathery shape beat at me, at the tent, frantically. It got free, howled into the darkness, high into the air. I could see the sky from where its screams came. It was greying in the slow dawn. But I could see no sign of the vampire. It was almost if not wholly invisible. It blanked out a few stars—that was the only visible sign of its existence. Even now that I had pinpointed its position, I couldn't distinguish its shape.

It howled again. It was in trouble. It beat frantically against the air, but failed to co-ordinate. I could see it now. It had lost its camouflage colouring, and, flapping furiously, was falling to the ground. It flopped for a moment, then lay still.

I felt weak, as I tried to rise. I found that I was bleeding from three punctures near the big vein on my forearm. I staggered, dizzily, to the vampire. It was dead. I kicked it once.

"Man has got Angie, now," I said, and made for the ship.

And that was where the story started, with a man staggering through an alien forest. As for that first victim, Jackson, there was a call of the sirens when they saw me. But this time, there was no unconsciousness, however much I longed for it in my state. The vampire had not had a chance to suck too much blood before it died.

Back in the ship, I was stuffed full of coffee and a hot breakfast. They gave me a transfusion, but I didn't really need it. Then, fully recovered, I marched proudly into Brockbank's office, ready to throw the solution in his lap.

He was waiting there, smiling as he gave orders for the survey to be picked up where it left off. Finished, he looked up at me.

"You're the expert. It poisoned itself when it drank your blood. Just tell me what it was in your blood that killed it without killing you as well?"

"Simple." And I'm afraid I sounded smug. "The trigestic in my blood killed it. An addict can tolerate many times a lethal dose of the drug he is addicted to."

"Why the hell didn't we think of it before?"

"'Tis folly to be wise!" I quoted. "It's just as well we didn't."

The colony worlds were modern and progressive, while the remnant of Mankind left behind on Earth became more and more decadent.

Till Life Do Us Part

by ROBERT PRESSLIE

Spence Logan never gave a dull party in his life. One glance as I entered the spacious room told me his latest death party was unlikely to spoil his record.

The room was tightly packed with guests but I was just that few inches taller than most of them and I was able to catch a glimpse of him at the far side of the room.

Anyone not knowing the set-up would have called me a liar if I had told them Spence Logan had been dead for two centuries.

But the guests were fully aware of the set-up. They would not have been present otherwise. With the exception of myself, everyone was either a deathmember or a liferenter. And I was no gate-crasher. Before I left Venus I told him I was coming and why I was coming. He had the gall to send me a written invitation. One ship, all the way from Earth to Venus, carrying nothing but one letter. He also had the money to make the gesture.

Since we had both, ostensibly at any rate, placed our cards on the table, I saw no reason for delaying the moment of our meeting. I started to make my way towards him. With

something like a hundred people between our respective positions, I decided my best bet was to avoid attempting to cross the room diagonally. Instead I chose to circle my way round its perimeter.

The party was already in full swing. It had all the ingredients of a Spence Logan orgy.

Microtonic pseudo-music was writhing its suggestive cacophony through the buzz and chatter of conversation and laughter. Chemical cocktails splashed unheedingly from goblets as I pushed my way through the crowd.

Logan's caterers had fixed the lights so that the whole scene was bathed—for the moment anyhow—in a pool of aquamarine blue. Between the heads of the guests and the high domed ceiling there was a cloud that reeked of every prurient narcotic smoke I had ever heard of. The tobacco tube in my mouth practically branded me as a saint among sinners.

There was an overtone to the smoke that I could not quite place at first. Then I was squeezing my way between two women and I recognised the sickly smell of carbon tetrachloride and I wondered just how much depravity they had been through if they had to resort to inhaling carbotet before they could even begin to get a sex kick.

I was just getting used to the sight of blue complexions when the lights changed colour and stage-lit the gathering in a bilious shade of gall-bladder green. To me the colour only conjured up a vision of vomit. But everyone else screamed and I guessed there was some erotic significance which I was too out-worldly to dig.

Maybe, I thought, the colour reminded them that they were half a thousand feet below the Atlantic Ocean. If so, I still did not get the significance. Up top on the surface, Earth was as much as ever a place of beauty, a sight that had caught my breath as I disembarked from my ship.

But who lived on the surface these days? And if it was smart and with it to have your domain below the surface of the ground it was twice as smart to have it under the ocean. The difficulty of building and maintaining equable living quarters under the pressing weight of the seas was a mark of financial standing. Personally I would rather have been back on Venus where natural air was good enough to breathe where men still found pleasure in work, where people preferred life to death.

I made slow progress round the room. Trying to squeeze my way past some of the more ecstatic groups was like shoving against a wall. They were too high on dope and drink to realise I wanted to get through, too deafened by the synthetic music to hear my requests for a free passage and too self-centred to care even if they had heard.

Politeness had no effect. Brute force was the only alternative. I had just shouldered an obstructing group out of my way when something else stopped me.

It hit me sharply on the right hip. I looked down. It was the console of the automatic musicmaker.

By this time I had had enough of Spence Logan's guests anyhow so it was a fifty-fifty mixture of anger and wish for reprisal that made me stab a finger at the cancellation button.

The silence of the musicmaker was barely noticeable with the prevailing hullabaloo of voices. I reset the tonality dial, moved the indicator from the microtonal position. I never had liked the scale chopped up into quarter tones and sixth tones. I chose the old-fashioned but more pleasant harmonic major scale, punched a yellow tab three times to set the key at E flat, moved the appropriate selector to three-four time, picked G, B flat and C for the first three notes and let the musicmaker do the rest.

The opening bars promised a reasonable facsimile of a Strauss waltz.

"Well, well," said a voice close to my ear. "And they told me time-travel was impossible."

She looked no more than eighteen, judging by the freshness of her complexion and the sparkle of her eyes. We were pressed pretty close together but I saw enough to give me a sketch of the full picture which I took to be one of a petite and shapely female.

"If you mean what I think you mean," I said, "you are right. I like the old stuff."

She wrinkled her nose in a cute confidential smile. "I'm a secret addict myself," she said. And with refreshing directness she asked, "What's your name?"

"Charles van Beer."

"Mine's Gail Winton," she said. Then her eyes flicked in a double-take. "Charles van Beer! The man who owns about half of Venus—"

I tried to match the gaiety of her mood by sloughing a few of my years and some of the dignity they had brought.

" You exaggerate, Miss Winton. Mind you, I'm not saying I'll starve in my old age."

" Starve ! I should say not. And call me Gail. Besides, you're not old."

She had a staccato way of changing subjects.

I changed subjects myself, brought the conversation closer to hand. " How did a kid like you get roped into one of Spence Logan's parties ? I take it you're not a deathmember."

" Neither are you if it comes to that."

" I'm too old to die."

" There you go again. Always on about your age."

" Gail, I'm over fifty. Barring accidents I should have as many years ahead of me as I have behind me. When the time comes for me to die it will be a natural death."

She caught the stress I had put on the word natural.

" You don't approve of deathmembership and liferenting, I take it ?"

" That's right. And I'm surprised that you do. You look like a decent girl."

" What has that got to do with it ? Look at it from my point of view. I'm not rich like you and most of them here. My father is only a topside spaceport engineer. What future do I have ? A normal lifespan—then nothing. So when somebody like Spence Logan comes along and offers me a fortune for my body—"

Disgust forced me to interrupt her. " You want to be a liferenter ?"

" Why not ? I lose nothing by it."

She was mistaken. I could have told her she was making the same error that all liferenters made, an error of human values.

Deathmembership had been invented two centuries earlier by Spence Logan. This, at least, was the common belief, but the truth was that the discovery had been made by a research team working for the Logan Chemical Corporation. Logan had killed the discovery before it got as far as the Patent Office and had appropriated it—and the credit thereby attached—for himself.

The basis of the discovery was a drug called Limbothene, a synthetic chemical based on a natural compound found in the thymus of hibernating animals. Hence its several nicknames such as Tortoise Juice or Hedgehog Blood. Limbothene had

the property of putting the human body into a state of suspended animation, a kind of perpetual hibernation which could only be cancelled by the injection of adrenalin into the heart.

Credit, or discredit, can be given to Logan for one piece of perception. About the same time as Limbothene was emerging from his research laboratories the technique of personality transference was evolved by Lazarus Fisher, an obscure but brilliant specialist in mental disorders. The method of personality transference, an astonishingly simple combination of VHF radio and encephalo-electrics, was less important to Fisher than its purpose.

Lazarus Fisher was a keen gardener in his spare time. From his knowledge that a sick plant can sometimes be given a new lease of life by transference to a new pot, he wondered if the process of transferring sick minds from one body to another for short periods would repair the disorder of the mind. His initial experiments, in which he paired mental patients and exchanged their personalities so that Black's mind and personality inhabited White's body and vice versa, were dismal failures. And the process of personality transference would have been shelved into oblivion except for one thing—the fact that Fisher's daughter, Fran, was one of Spence Logan's most intimate friends.

Fran Fisher told Logan about her father's work. Logan immediately saw how he could use it in conjunction with Limbothene.

On its own, Limbothene promised immortality. But what good was immortality to a man if he was not awake and aware to appreciate it? However, if a man put his body into cold storage under the influence of Limbothene and found someone willing to sleep in that body while he rented his own body to the personality of the first man, then a form of true immortality was available.

There was an apparent flaw in the scheme in that the finding of liferenters ought to have been difficult. But Spence Logan had no such difficulty. As always, he found that money in sufficient quantity could buy anything. Even a man's body.

Two centuries ago Spence Logan's body had been laid in the first of the underwater deathmember vaults and Logan had gone out into the world in the vessel of flesh and blood that

had once been known to others as Noel Thorne, an accounts clerk in the Logan chemical empire.

With Noel Thorne asleep in the body in the vault, Logan had proceeded to live it up for ten years. So went the dossier of information that had brought me to Earth. His constant companion had been Fran Fisher, by this time deathmember Number Two and the occupant of the body of Della Cook, another employee of Logan's.

When the years began to take their toll, Spence Logan and Fran Fisher found two new liferenters. The ageing, worn-out bodies of Noel Thorne and Della Cook, were returned to their rightful owners who, with the money Logan had given them, proceeded to find liferenters for themselves and sent their own second-hand bodies to vaults three and four. And so the sick domain of Spence Logan grew.

"Darling! You got here at last."

The female who had joined us was tall, sleek and expensively groomed. The face and figure I did not know. But the bold insolent look of the eyes, projected by the person within, gave me all the identity aid that was necessary.

"Miss Fisher?" I said, hardly making any question of it.

"That's right, Charlie boy," she said, and I winced at the familiarity. "Don't be such a prig," she went on. "Call me Fran."

Since I had not come this far just to be polite I said, "Very well, I will. On one condition. That you call me Charles. Or Mister van Beer. Or simply van Beer. But Charlie I will not tolerate. Do I make myself clear—*Fran*?"

She was invulnerable however. Centuries of being one of the chosen elite had given her a poise that was unshakable. She leaned across Gail Winton, caught me unawares and kissed me. And while she did it her eyes never closed but gazed brazenly into mine, flaunting her arrogance.

"Charles," she purred, "Charles van Beer, knight errant from Venus, come to wicked old Earth to slay the bad dragon. That about sums up your intention, doesn't it? Only I'm afraid you are in for a disappointment, darling. We can't offer you the conventional damsel in distress. And the dragon still has a great deal of fire in his belly."

She saw my glance at Gail.

"Your damsel in distress? Are you a damsel in distress, my child? *Mister* van Beer is under the impression that your

innocence is in danger of being sullied. Tell the dear man. Tell him how you were bullied and coerced into coming here. Tell him how the dragon carried you off from your ivory tower and is planning to—”

Gail interrupted. “Don’t tease him, Fran. Anyhow, he knows already that I am here of my own free will.”

My emotions were mixed. I was grateful for the intercession on my behalf yet my pride was injured that it should have been necessary for a slip of a girl to defend a man of my years and experience.

I said, “Maybe the damsel doesn’t realise she is in distress.”

Fran Fisher laughed.

She said, “Where do you Venusians live? In monasteries and nunneries? I can assure you, Charlie—I beg your pardon, *Charles*—that what girls of her age don’t know down here isn’t worth knowing. Besides, nothing is settled yet. She can still change her mind. If she wants to. Do you, my dear?”

Gail gave me a look of apology as she shook her head.

“That only proves my point,” I said to Fran Fisher. “For all her sophistication she still doesn’t realise that she has taken the bait that was dangled in front of her eyes.”

“Bait, dear *Charles*?”

“Double bait, Miss Fisher. Today a cash-down payment for the purchase of one soul. Later the promise of pseudo-immortality when she uses the cash to buy herself a death-membership.”

“Really, Sir Galahad! You might at least get your facts right. We don’t buy souls. Only bodies.”

“You can’t corrupt one without corrupting the other.”

“Who’s corrupting? We borrow the body for a few years; we give it back. Tell me, does this body look corrupted to you?”

“To be brutally frank—yes it does.”

Fran Fisher’s green eyes twitched ever so slightly at the corners. I knew that for the first time I had got through to her; succeeded in hurting the ego beneath the flesh and blood. But it was not until later that I knew why.

She smiled. It was the kind of smile that only a bitchy woman can produce to perfection.

“Charles,” she said, drawing the name out long and caressingly, “I could so easily learn to hate you.”

“At your convenience,” I parried.

"Or love you," she continued, as if she had not heard me. "That is if Spence wouldn't mind. But I rather think he would mind very much. Spence is quite attached to his Fran, as you may have heard. It's quite a compliment really. To have one man's devoted love for two centuries. Don't you think?"

"Love?" I said. "Or the mating of two polluted personalities in the ultimate of perversion?"

She snuggled her way between Gail and myself. Up close I could see by the dancing lights in her eyes that she was thoroughly angry. Yet she struggled to maintain the same bantering tone as she said, "Well, well. Now the claws are begining to show. And I had been told that Charles van Beer of Venus was the prototype of gentility and gallantry. But it seems he is capable also of ugly thoughts and spits out words like perversion."

"I suppose you call it two hundred years of fidelity."

"Something like that. I certainly don't see how it can be called perversion."

I thought about it ; tried to estimate how many liferenters' bodies Fran Fisher and Spence Logan had coupled. I thought about things like a young girl renting a body that had been hitherto chaste and getting it back in a state it would never have degenerated to with its rightful occupant. I thought about how the same girl, taking repossession of her body, must inevitably become as spiritually degraded as her body—on the principle that the contents must assume the shape of the container.

I thought about all these things but said none of them. The logic would have been wasted on Fran Fisher. She had her way of thinking. I had mine. There was no common ground on which they could even approach a meeting.

"Miss Fisher," I said. "I am not going to argue. I don't need to. You see, your whole set-up ends tonight."

She laughed. This time it was from genuine amusement.

She said, "Spence might have other ideas. You don't imagine, do you, that he permitted you to come here without taking precautions?"

"Certainly not. But I am not quite as stupid as you seem to think. It was very obvious that he would take precautions. So, in turn, I took precautions against any conceivable precautions of his."

"You *think* you did. Evidently you have underestimated Spence. You'll see."

"I intend to. And if you will back off a little I might be able to get round the room to Logan."

She put out a hand. For a moment I wondered what was coming: a pat on the cheek or a slap. I got neither. One second the hand was close to my face and I was staring at a huge emerald on her middle finger. Then her thumb moved. The emerald flipped back on a tiny hinge and a fine mist sprayed into my nose, eyes and mouth from the miniature aerosol under the emerald.

"Don't worry," said the Fisher woman. "It's not narcotic. Only a temporary euphoric so you won't feel too disappointed when you find that you wasted your time coming here. You might even get happy enough to forget what you came for and be able to join in the fun and games."

Whatever the drug was it certainly worked fast. Already I could feel a definite elation. The sensation was similar to having three quick brandies on an empty stomach.

I had decided to deprive myself of the pleasure of Fran Fisher's company anyhow, and when the lighting system did a rapid shift from green to sodium yellow, that clinched it. On top of the aerosol intoxicant, the things that the yellow light did to her complexion made my stomach heave.

Her parting words were, "If you're going over to see Spence, darling, don't forget what I told you about the dragon still having fire in his belly."

It took me over thirty minutes to get through the crowd and within reach of Spence Logan.

A thing that struck me as peculiar and significant was the complete indifference with which I was treated. They must have known who I was, yet nobody stared and nobody seemed afraid of what I might do. I considered the possibility that Logan had not told them I was coming with the intention of destroying them. That would account for their nonchalance. Yet in a tightly closed community like theirs a stranger must be immediately evident. But they showed indifference. I concluded that they knew who I was, why I was there and that they had such supreme confidence in Logan's ability to thwart my intentions that they could afford to be indifferent.

Logan was engrossed in an animated discussion with a quartet of young girls. They looked equally beautiful and surprisingly intelligent.

It sounded as if one of them said something about threpsological equilibrium. I thought another one was talking about pharmacogenetics. I also thought about what kind of drug Fran Fisher had doused me with that could induce hallucinations of this sort.

"Logan," I said, since he looked like he would never notice me. "Logan, I want to talk to you."

"Amuse yourselves," he dismissed the girls.

To me, he said, "I thought you were never coming across. I heard you had arrived. Welcome to Loganville, van Beer. What do you think of it?"

Maybe it was the drug but it seemed to me he was smiling—and with real pleasure.

"It stinks!"

He laughed. "I shouldn't have asked. You're prejudiced."

"Not only me, Logan. I'm just the spokesman for everyone on Venus. I think what they think."

"And they think my underwater world of near immortality should be blown to hell?"

"With me as the man who pushes the plunger of the detonator."

Logan's eyes softened, his expression sobered. "I'm sorry to have to hurt your feelings, van Beer—and I mean that—but there is nothing you can do to destroy this place. On the other hand, I hope to be able to salve the injury to your dignity by convincing you that everything you believe about me is utterly wrong. It is my further hope that you will stay to join us."

"Spare me your pity, Logan. You'll need it all for yourself. As for your hopes . . . well, I'd say you were suffering from senile decay. You might *look* young but you haven't been able to stop your faculties from dimming."

"Charles," said Logan, "I was going to be as gentle as possible. Your attitude, however, forces me to hurt you."

I thought about the subaqueous missile lying three miles off on the sea-bed. I thought about whether I should trigger it now.

Logan cut into my thoughts.

He said, "You can send the signal if you like Charles. Go ahead. The transmitter is sewn under a flap of skin in your left armpit. You can energise it and it will send its signal. But the missile won't react."

I tried to focus some coherence out of the chaos in my mind. The missile could have been found by search. But the transmitter? Nobody had frisked me. The only way it could have been detected was by . . .

"Exactly, Charles. By telepathy. I've studied you well. I assessed that you would feel it necessary to tell me about my wicked ways before you did anything drastic. So I felt perfectly safe in taking no precautions until you actually arrived at my party. As soon as Fran Fisher told me your intended modus operandi then I sent instructions for the missile to be made harmless."

"But Fran never—"

I struggled with the implications before me. "She's telepathic too?"

"That is only one of the advantages of deathmembership. The mind doesn't—as you implied a moment ago—decay. It grows. It reaches extreme stages of development that were never possible in a normal life-span. I think we had better leave the crowd. Come with me."

Bemused by his words and befuddled by the euphoric drug I followed Spence Logan without argument.

We seemed to spend hours tramping along innumerable corridors, turning off to the right and the left time after time. I had no way of knowing whether we were making for the innermost heart of the sub-oceanic world or for the outside of it. Once I thought I recognised a lock similar to the one through which I had entered Logan's kingdom from the diving capsule that was the only way down to it. But otherwise I was lost in the maze of passages.

Logan reminded me of his mental prowess when he said, "We're going inwards."

We erupted from one corridor into a tremendous room. To me it looked empty as we walked across the bare metallic floor.

"This is where we keep the bodies," Logan said. "In slide drawers in the walls," he added. "Like a morgue I suppose you would say."

I said nothing, but continued to follow him across the vault, along a short passage and into a room than was even bigger than the body store.

"Remind you of anything?" asked Logan.

The effects of the drug were passing from the initial bemusing stage to the ultimate sense of well-being. I felt calm and

contented. My antagonism to Logan and his corrupt world was as strong as ever. But it no longer blinded me. I was prepared to discuss our differences rationally.

I answered his question : "Reduce this room to about one twentieth of its size and it could pass for the control room of the ship that brought me from Venus to Earth."

He gave me the kind of look a teacher gives to a dumb pupil who has unexpectedly given a correct answer.

There were seats in this room. A great ring of seats facing the instrument panels. Logan got into one, motioned for me to sit beside him.

"You don't like me," he said. It was not a question. "Quite apart from my connection with perpetuating a few lives you still don't like me. Shall I tell you why?"

I shrugged. "You're the mindreader."

"Basically it's jealousy, Charles. You are a rich man yourself. What you would call a selfmade man. You've worked hard to get what you have. And you resent my wealth because in the first place I inherited it and secondly because I salted it down two centuries ago and it has been growing ever since."

He didn't wait for comment. Anyhow there was truth in what he said.

"Next," he continued, "there is the matter of Venus. Of which you say you are the spokesman."

"You're damn right I am." There was no heat in my words. But while I was prepared to take any of his personal remarks without feeling the need for self-justification, I could not forget my obligations to my fellow worldsmen.

"I know," said Logan. "You see yourself as the champion of—"

"You're wrong. It's not like that. How do you think they feel ? When Earth got too crowded their ancestors pioneered the colonisation of Venus. For two centuries they've had to work their guts out making a barren world into a home. They work while you play and naturally they don't like it. Neither do they like seeing Earth going to waste. What remains down here now that we and Mars have skimmed off the surplus population ? Topside you've got a few spaceports, a handful of synthesiser factories for the basic needs of the few people left. Plus this place at the bottom of the sea. And what does

it contain? Hedonists, pleasure seeking egotists, parasites. Is this the ultimate destiny of Earth? We don't think so."

I expected Logan to shoot back at me with venom. Instead he still had that look of pity on his face. In his eyes there was no venom. Not even levity, which I also expected. In his eyes there was an expression of solemnity.

He said, "I take it you've heard of Lazarus Fisher and his experiments with sick minds. But did you know why his experiments failed?"

"Does it matter? You made use of his work."

"They failed because the transferred personalities did not fit the bodies they were switched to. If you were here any other day except today you would notice how easy it is to distinguish a deathmember—he doesn't fit his borrowed body."

"Any other day?" I asked.

He touched his face. He said, "This is me. My own body. The same goes for Fran Fisher and the others at my party. We can live a maximum of only thirty days in transference. During those thirty days the mental agony of being in the wrong container builds up to a point where insanity would result if we did not revert to our own bodies for one day. So for one day per month we are ourselves. And for one day per month we relax. Admittedly we go to extremes. But there is no alternative. Except insanity."

"You mean these parties don't go on all the time?"

"Only twelve times a year."

"Then," I said, "if it's such a terrible thing to be a deathmember, why—?"

"Why?" he interrupted. "Look in front of you. Look at those instrument panels and remember what you yourself said they reminded you of."

Not being entirely dimwitted, I caught on. "Space? The whole thing? The entire suboceanic structure is really a gigantic spaceship?"

"Almost," he said. "We've almost done it. For two centuries we have worked with one goal in mind. We have suffered torment, gambled with madness. Hedonists you call us! Masochists more likely. But it has been worth it."

He spoke now with the enthusiasm of a fanatic.

I reminded him, "We have already conquered space. There are millions of us on Mars and Venus to prove it."

He pounced on my statement.

He said, " You swam a little river, that's all. Then when you got to the other side you pitched your tent and forgot about the ocean that still had to be crossed. You are the guilty one, Charles, not me. You, and the others like you, got as far as Venus and Mars—then you stopped. Given brand new worlds you made them carbon copies of the Earth you had known. And that was enough for you. Ambition died, too easily sated. I know what you're going to say : It was a Herculean task in itself to make your planets comfortable. I'm not arguing. Because that is precisely why some of us chose to stay behind."

" To avoid the work ?"

" To continue the real work, Charles. In a human lifespan the brain doesn't have time to develop fully. And just when it has a paltry store of knowledge it dies. The next generation has to start all over again. There is no continuity. But we *made* continuity by using Fisher's system of personality transference. We gave ourselves time to learn. And, by God, we learned ! Some of our deathmembers can mathematically outstrip a computer. Some have worked on the known but hitherto unfathomable link between space and time. And we have almost made the breakthrough."

He let his arms flop loosely at his sides.

" I've said my piece, Charles. Now I'm asking you to stay and help us finish the task. We'll take you and a hundred of your best brains. For the price of endless mental pain you can help us and share the prize."

He took my shoulder, forced me to face him.

" The stars, Charles," he said. " We've got to get to the stars. What do you say ?"

I thought about the things I owned on Venus. Valued them against the priceless worth of a dream. I thought about the things I didn't own. The things I had been too busy to acquire. Things like a woman's love. I thought about Gail Winton.

All of this thinking took less than a handful of seconds before I put my hand on his.

" Logan," I said. " I fancy getting my feet wet. In that ocean you mentioned."

Robert Presslie

Sole survivor of a spaceship disaster, Martin Regan with his rebuilt body and new personality, easily takes the place of the missing Manuel Cabrera, son of one of Earth's wealthiest men, who was lost in the accident. The deception, however, is difficult to maintain.

DAWN'S LEFT HAND

by LAN WRIGHT

Part Two of Three Parts

foreword

Martin Regan, roving agent for the Universal Export Agency, leaves Earth for the planet Ferroval to conduct some business for his company. His cabin companion on the starship is Manuel Cabrera, a wealthy businessman, who insists upon having the lower sleeping berth, an essential survival factor, in his mind, as each berth can become a self-sealed life-shell in the event of an accident or having to abandon ship—the extra seconds gained could be the difference between life and death.

Manuel seldom leaves the cabin, except for a brief exercise period each morning, and it is while he is absent on the fourth morning of the journey that disaster strikes and the ship explodes into molten ruins. Regan dives into Manuel's berth and is safely ejected from the inferno, but has suffered severe burns to face, hands and legs. The life-shell emits a continuous radio signal and

is eventually picked up and Regan recovers consciousness in a hospital on the planet Lichar, where alien surgeons remould his face and give him prosthetic limbs as well as optical lenses for his eyes.

During the months of his slow recovery he discovers that he has been mistaken for Manuel Cabrero and owing to the slowness of communications it is not easy to notify Cabrero's relatives. It is two years before he leaves hospital, to find that he is a rich man, the insurance company who covered the risk having paid him one hundred thousand credits. Transhipped to Ferroval he finds Cabrero's father, and two cousins, Carlo and Armand, waiting for him. He finally convinces them that he is not Manuel but the elder Cabrero decides that Regan must take the place of his son — powerful political forces are lined up against his wealthy empire and the death of Manuel was to have been a focal point in the extermination of the Cabreros.

Because he has no choice, Regan agrees to impersonate Manuel, and leaves Ferroval for Earth on the Cabrero's heavily guarded spaceship. Arriving at "Xanadu" the Cabrero's estate in the Southern Andes, he is told to prepare himself to meet the remaining members of the family and is given photographs and biographical data of each to memorise.

ten

By the time Carlo knocked on the door for the second time, Regan had studied and memorised the faces on the fifteen photos, and learned almost by heart the brief biographical details that Carlo had scribbled on the back of each.

They walked along the high, brightly lit corridor towards the wide, curved stairway that led down to the ground floor, and Regan felt the tension pulling at him for some reason that he could not explain. Why should he be so troubled? These were not his people, not his family. There was no-one among them to whom he owed anything, no-one whom he even knew, save by courtesy of a small colour print.

"Nervous?" asked Carlo.

"No. Should I be?" Regan fiddled with his dark glasses and hoped that his appearance would not cause too much comment.

They went slowly down the stairway, and crossed the wide, panelled hall. A servant bowed slightly and pushed open the

great double doors that led through to a huge dining room. Beyond was light and colour, gleaming crystal and glass, bright silver and darkened woodwork. There were women in brilliant dresses, men in sombre black, and from the gathering he could pick out the old, stooped form of Cabrera, still with his walking cane, approaching him across the thickly carpeted floor. Beside him was an old lady, grey haired and austere, leaning on the old man's arm, yet walking with a firm, upright stance as they approached.

The old couple stopped two yards away, and Regan felt an unreasoning panic rise within him. Surely they had not gone so far as to deceive this old woman that here was her lost son whom she had thought was dead? His eyes met hers across the intervening space as though drawn by a magnet. They were old and grey, nestling in the brown wrinkles of her face, yet bright and alert. As he met them with his own gaze Regan felt the panic fall away; there was knowledge in them that was far more important to him than the tears of welcome that he had half expected. The thin, old lips below them trembled slightly, but the eyes were bright and diamond hard, giving him the message that he so badly needed to be told.

She knew that he was not Manuel.

Even as the relief flooded through him she released the old man's arm and crossed to him, lifting her arms and her face to him in all embracing gesture.

"My son."

Regan embraced her gently, and said nothing.

Behind the old couple a tall, statuesque girl with long, dark hair, offsetting a plain, white dress, moved to greet him. Her skin was creamy white and flawless, her features strong and regular, yet with a beauty that had its origin in centuries of breeding. Her eyes were deep violet and they met Regan's impassively, set in a face that was cold and devoid of emotion. There was no message for him there.

She drew near and lifted her face for him to kiss.

"Manuel!"

"Giselle!" Regan brushed her cheek with his lips, and felt the cool scent of her in his nostrils. As she stood back he looked at her and wondered how she was still unmarried at thirty-five. Her beauty alone would have made her sought after by the richest men in the universe; her wealth would have attracted all others.

There followed a charade in which he played his part with the ease of an automaton ; the cheeks of women were offered to him to brush with his own hairless, baby skin ; the clasp of hands from men who held his prosthetic limb gingerly, as if expecting that it would come away from his arm if they gripped too hard. And when it was over and the platitudes and greetings done, Carlo led him to the crowded table and seated him beside Armand. At the head of the table sat the old man with Giselle on his left hand and Regan to his right. Thus protected, Regan had only brief comments to make, and these he made with an ease that surprised him, though when the vast meal was over he could not recall one word of the conversation that had eddied around him.

The main meal ended and the women rose from the table. Regan felt, not for the first time, as if he were centuries back in the past, with the old world courtesies of the dead years holding him in their grasp. The old lady rose at the other end of the table, and called to him along its vast length.

"Manuel. It would please me if you would take me to my room."

Regan bowed and walked the length of the table to offer his arm. A servant opened the doors and together, moving slowly, they left the room. Her grip on his arm was light but firm ; her step was sure, and there was no frailty about her despite her age. Regan waited to speak, but he could not, and the silence of the old lady shackled his tongue. They climbed the wide stairs and went along the panelled corridor towards the far west wing of the building. She paused before a door and released his arm.

"Please, come in, Manuel. I would speak with you."

The room behind the door was only the first of what turned out to be a private three roomed suite, and beyond it a bright wood fire burned in an old fashioned grate, warming the neat, austere lounge that had none of the comfort of the rest of the house.

"This is my home," she told him. "This is where I keep those things that are precious to me. To the old it is the old things that are most important. There are memories far more important than dreams. Dreams are for the young, memories are for the old." The bright eyes swivelled on him suddenly. "They tell me that your name is Regan."

"That is true. Martin Regan."

"You were the last to see my—my son alive."

"That, too, is true."

She turned away, nodding slowly. "It is sad to lose one's only son, Senor Regan. It is doubly sad to lose him twice."

"I am sorry—"

"You should not be. You are alive, and that is good. Too many people die by violence these days. Where is your home?"

"Caledon."

She nodded. "I have heard of it. They tell me it is a lovely world."

"So I thought until first I saw this valley."

"To all men Earth is beautiful."

Regan shook his head. "No. It is ugly. I am an outworlder and Earth is ugly and hateful. It is a cruel, hard world that demands and demands and gives little in return. I hated Earth until I saw Xanadu, and then I knew what Earth had been like centuries ago, and I don't hate it any more—I only hate what it has become."

"Yet you have a family on Caledon?"

"Yes, my parents live there and my relatives—"

"You are married?"

"No."

The old lady poked at the wood fire with a poker. "I do not understand what is happening. My husband has his secrets even from me. I know only that the family must come first, and that you are aiding us by your presence here. For that I must thank you, Senor. Without the family this valley would not exist—think of that, and perhaps you will realise why we fight to keep it." She turned away from the fire and sat down in an ancient, high-backed rocking chair. "And now, Senor Regan, I am tired. This has been a sad day for me. I hope that I never see its like again."

"Of course. I will leave you now. Goodnight, Senora, and—I am sorry."

He went out of the small, hot room, and found Giselle waiting for him in the outer room.

They stood for several long seconds looking at each other, and Regan had only one thought in his mind. There were now five people who knew that he was not Manuel Cabrera—and the odds were mounting against him.

At last she turned to the door and Regan followed her into the corridor. Silently, they walked back to the head of the stairs, and as they paused before descending, the girl said

coldly, "I knew that you were not Manuel the moment you greeted me."

"How?"

"Carlo should have told you." A ghost of a smile twisted her perfect mouth. "Manuel never kissed me in his whole life."

She led him down the stairway and paused in the entrance hall.

"They are waiting for you to join them."

Regan studied her thoughtfully. "And you?"

"I will join the other women." She smiled more widely, the first real sign of emotion that Regan had seen her display, but it was a mocking, half derisive smile. "Don't worry. If my father wishes it, then your secret is safe with me."

Regan watched her go through another door at the far side of the entrance hall, and then he went back into the dining room.

The men were gathered around one end of the great table, clear now of the dirty plates and the white linen. There were only large brandy glasses, ash trays and the heavy, pungent odour of tobacco.

"Ah, Manuel," called the old man. "Is your mother resting?"

"She was tired by the excitement of the day," said Regan.

"Of course."

From beside old Cabrera the thin, slight figure of his 'cousin,' Simon, rose to his feet. "Come, Manuel, sit by your father."

"Thank you, cousin." Regan walked around the table and took the proffered chair.

"You have changed greatly since last we saw you," Simon pulled another chair nearer to the group. "We have heard briefly of your experiences. You are lucky to be alive, Manuel."

Regan looked at Carlo, but the black man avoided his glance.

"Even your voice has changed," said Simon.

"Even my voice, cousin," agreed Regan equably. "I have to thank the Licharians for my life and such faculties as I still possess. I would be dead—or worse."

"What could be worse than death, nephew?" Pedro Cabrera, his uncle, was a younger version of the old man, his hair still jet black, but his face leathery with age.

"Blindness, no arms or legs, no face, no ears—nothing but a mind trapped in a body which will not die."

Silence greeted him, and he could see Carlo glaring at him across the table. Perhaps this was more than Manuel would have said. Regan poured himself a brandy from the decanter and felt an overpowering urge to finish the pantomime once and for all, here and now.

"I think," said Carlo, "that Manuel would prefer to forget his experiences for now—"

"He is of the family," said Pedro sharply, "he knows what is in our minds."

"Uncle Pedro—"

"Carlo, we know nothing," snapped the older man. He turned to the bent figure of the old man seated stonily at the head of the table. "Brother, tell us, do you know what happened to the carrier that Manuel had with him?"

Regan turned his head slowly and gazed bleakly at Carlo. His dark face was set in rigid lines, the eyes bleak and expressionless, and Regan knew with sudden grim delight that Pedro had spoken out of turn.

"We know nothing," said the high voice of Cabrera.

"But everything was with you when the capsule was hurled clear of the ship," insisted Pedro, his attention turning again on Regan. "That much we know because everything was returned to us—everything that is—"

"Except the carrier," finished Regan softly. He strove to keep the exultation from his face and tone. "That being so—" he let the implication hang in the air.

"We must assume that it is in other hands," said Pedro icily.

A chair whispered on the thick carpet, and Cabrera was on his feet, leaning on the ever present walking cane that was his third and strongest leg. "There has been enough of speculation, Pedro," he said. "We have had a long and trying day. This discussion leads us nowhere."

The others rose too, and there were murmured, 'Goodnights,' one to another. Carlo stepped near to Regan and smiled at him, a smile denied by the coldness of his eyes.

"Come, cousin. I will see you to your room."

Not a word was spoken as they mounted the staircase and walked along the gallery that led to Regan's room. There were

more, "Goodnights," and at last Regan and Carlo were alone outside the room of the dead Manuel.

"You should not be too clever, cousin," said Carlo, softly. "Uncle Pedro was wrong to precipitate the matter, and you were wrong to take advantage of his lapse."

Regan smiled disarmingly. "I went where the wind of conversation led me."

"There is such a thing as too much knowledge—"

"Are you threatening me?"

"No, cousin, warning you is all." Carlo eyed him sombrely. "There may come a time, if you persist in being clever, when we may have to reconsider your position, and that consideration might not be to your advantage. And now—goodnight, cousin."

eleven

Regan closed the door behind him, and locked it. The action was a reflex one, and he didn't realise he had done it until he walked away.

One way and another the evening had been both a success and a failure. He had learned a great deal, but that knowledge was offset by the growing number of people who knew his true identity. At first, when the old man had told him to retain the name of Manuel Cabrera, Regan had been surprised. He had taken it for granted that his safety lay in the protection that had been offered by the head of the Cabrera family; now, he realised, his safety lay in co-operation—or did it?

The slow unfolding of the true situation in which he was caught did nothing to alleviate his fears. Old Cabrera was too crafty and too experienced a man to make any move or take any decision without first having considered all the implications, and he'd had all of the time during the journey from Ferroval to consider just how he should use the man whom everyone thought was his son.

Regan sat down by the window and looked out across the darkened lawn. He took off his dark glasses and allowed his vision to open up the landscape beyond the wide garden. The trees hid the near distant view, but beyond them, high and gleaming in the moonlight, rose the mountains. They were all of twenty miles away, but they were as clear to him as if it had been broad daylight.

The belongings of Manuel Cabrera had been returned to his family, Regan had known that already and had not been surprised. It had been a careless move by Pedro Cabrera to reveal the fact that something was missing when the family had received those belongings—careless, but unavoidable because of his ignorance.

A carrier !

Regan thought of the first conversation he had with the old man ; he thought of the difficulties which Manuel had encountered in trying to leave Earth on some mysterious mission—a mission which had involved the innocent person of Regan within its toils. A carrier ! That could mean papers, documents, records—which were now in the hands of some unknown agency inimical to the Cabrera family. There still remained one question to which he could not even begin to guess the answer. What possible use was he to Cabrera ? Did it really matter whether Manuel was alive or dead ? To the old man, obviously, it did ; and if it mattered to him then it mattered to others.

Regan shuddered slightly.

He left the window and took off his jacket. On the bed lay his night clothes, neatly laid out by the unnamed servant. The sheets were folded back, and on the white pillow lay a small, black box. Regan felt apprehension tingle his spine, and his first thought was to throw it out of the window before it blasted him to oblivion. He bent nearer and saw that there was a short lead running from it which ended in a tiny earplug. Thoughtfully, moving slowly, he lifted the lid and found that the box contained a wire recorder and an envelope.

He lifted the envelope and weighed it in his hand ; it was slim, yet well filled, and when he slit it open he found that it contained ten one thousand credit notes, brand new and with the telltale silver of metal gleaming slightly where it was bonded to the blue and grey printed paper.

Even more slowly he reached for the tiny earplug and examined it closely. It was of a common type which he had seen before, with a built-in switch that would operate the recorder as soon as he put it to his ear. Well, there was only one way of finding out what it contained. Carefully, he pushed the plug into his ear, and at once the thin, hair wire began to move across the recording head.

"Regan! Yes, I know your name." The voice was tinny, thin, a mechanical whisper that was completely unidentifiable. "Regan, listen carefully. This spool is self erasing and you have only one chance to hear what I have to say. You are in danger here because old Cabrera needs you to recover that which is lost to him. You are the bait which he must use if he is to recover this thing of which I speak."

The carrier, thought Regan, bleakly.

"Your one chance is to leave here as soon as possible. If it is not yet midnight when you hear this, then go tonight. If it is later then wait and go tomorrow."

Regan glanced at the clock by the door. It was eleven thirty.

"You will head for the mountains by the road which leads from the landing field. The distance is fourteen miles and you must do it by four in the morning. The road peters out short of the mountains, and from the end of it you will see a pass that rises between the peaks. The climb from there to the head of the pass will take you three hours. You must be there by seven. Two miles through the pass you will come to a small stream that issues from the side of the mountain on the left of your path, and by that stream you will find a one-man copter which you can use for the rest of your journey down to the coastal area. Your course is pre-set for the landing area Santiago Two One Nine, and the copter is registered from there. After that you are on your own."

I'm on my own now, thought Regan.

"There is money in the envelope which will take you home to Caledon—if you can make it. That is your affair. If you go tonight and fall behind the schedule I have set out—if you cannot reach the end of the road by four thirty at the latest—then turn back and try again tomorrow. If you see anyone or anyone sees you on the return then say that you could not sleep and went for a walk. And remember, there are spy screens guarding this valley, and you will not be safe off the ground until you are through the pass and by the stream of which I have spoken. Place this box in the top drawer of the bureau by the bed and it will be collected later.

"And now, goodbye. Your life is in your own hands."

The wire spun to an end and slid from the spool with a click as the force of the motor pulled it from its moorings. Regan removed the earpiece and laid it in the box. A glance at the

clock told him that it was just after eleven thirty, and his wrist-watch confirmed this.

He sat down on the edge of the bed and wondered what he should do. There was too much truth in what the wire had told him for him to ignore it entirely. There was truth in the desire of the old man to use him for his own ends ; there was truth in the knowledge that something had been lost which Cabrera wanted to recover ; there was truth in the subterfuge of Regan's own concealed identity ; and there had been truth in Carlo's warning barely ten minutes earlier.

Yet still he hesitated.

Not for a minute did Regan doubt his ability to complete the timetable set out for him on the recorder. He was, in a synthetic way, stronger and fitter than he had ever been in his whole life before. The scarred body with its baby, shining skin, could rely on the prosthetic legs to carry it far and fast with little danger that weariness would hinder his progress. The one question in his mind concerned the motives of his unseen helper. What possible reason could there be for such aid as had been offered by the unseen voice ?

Clearly, someone wanted him out of the way, and Regan was stubborn enough not to give way to his own desire for freedom just on the spur of the moment. And yet his stubbornness might be misplaced. The old man indicated more than once what would have happened had Regan not agreed to accompany him voluntarily, and that, alone, could be reason enough for him to leave Xanadu with all possible speed. The reason for going was clear ; the means of going were to hand.

Regan felt a sudden claustrophobic desire get away from the house and from Cabrera. Once in the city state he could get in touch with either the terran representative of his firm or with the Caledon diplomatic service. In a few days his troubles would be over, and there would be nothing that anyone could do about it. He stuffed the money into his jerkin pocket, slid out of the neat, dark trousers of the evening suit and dressed himself in the heavier, more serviceable clothing that hung in a cupboard to one side of the bed. For a moment he hesitated. There was nothing he wished to take with him—no belongings that he could call his own. The clothes he wore had been provided by Cabrera, the watch at his wrist had been a present from Armand when they had given him his wardrobe of clothes aboard the ship from Ferroval. No, there was nothing that he could truly call his own.

The gallery outside his room was still well lit, probably there would be servants about still clearing up the remains of the dinner. He crossed to the window and looked out. His room was on the first floor of the house and about thirty yards from the main entrance. The moon was behind the house and casting long shadows across the wide lawn. He would be in darkness to normal eyes.

Moving rapidly, he bulked the evening suit into a roll and stuffed it into bed, pulling the clothes well up to simulate a sleeping form. He climbed over the window ledge and lowered his body out and down so that he hung precariously by one hand while his other pushed the window closed above him. There had to be no sign that this had been his way of leaving—at least, not until much later.

Away to the left the bulking curve of the corner buttress, with a black downpipe in the corner, beckoned him. Surely and quickly, Regan swung his body along the window ledge and reached for a stone outcropping that ran along the front of the house and about two feet below his present position. His arms ached a little above the prosthetic elbows, but the fingers gripped hard and surely. The ivy rustled slightly as his body brushed it, but save for that there was no sound of his passing. The stone ledge ended, and the down pipe was within his reach. Thirty seconds more and the ground was firm beneath his feet.

The time was eleven forty-seven, and Regan wasn't even breathing hard.

twelve

The golden fingers of the dawn were brushing the very tops of the mountains as Regan paused at the end of the white road which stretched far behind him, back towards the landing field. His body ached slightly, and his mouth was dry, but the cool night air had an exhilarating effect on him that washed away any weariness he might have felt.

Before him the way led up, steeper now, pointing to the black orifice of the pass between the peaks for which he was headed. It was three thirty, and it would be dawn in another half hour. He stretched his back muscles and moved on up the slope.

It was just after six when he reached the head of the pass and began the slow descent on the other side. The mountain air

was cold in the early morning, but there was no breeze and everything was clean and sweet. His progress was slower because of the rocks and the boulders, yet he was well ahead of the schedule laid down for him. He doubted that the main household at Xanadu would be about much before eight, and it would probably be much later than that before anyone enquired of his whereabouts. He had well over an hour and a half to play with, and already, just ahead, he could hear the tinkling of fast running water against the rocks.

The stream was small and clear, bubbling over the rocks and foaming at the base of the larger boulders. It was ice cold and Regan quenched his thirst and bathed his face in it before looking around for the copter. It was not far away, half hidden under an overhang of rock, yet clearly visible to anyone who was looking for it. He strapped himself into the single harness seat, and swung the tiny control panel into position in front of him. The controls were a single toggle switch and a power control beneath his right foot. The one thing he lacked was a proper flight suit, and it would be cold heading down from the mountains so early in the morning.

He pressed the starter switch and the motor hummed to life beneath his seat, swirling the wide arms of the rotors above his head, and increasing his discomfort. The one-man copters were cheap to buy, easy to run, but they had their disadvantages.

Below him the valley floor fell away, and the whole vista of the mountains opened up as he rose to gain height. The vision of the coastal plain that he had seen only the day previously, spread ahead of him, this time in reverse, with the sea a grey mantle far off in the distance, while nearer to him the plague covering of the city state blotted the ground from view.

Regan set the controls for landing area Santiago Two One Nine, as he had been ordered, and sat back while the tiny machine flew itself. Eastward it flew, clear of the mountains, and then south, parallel with the coast that lay to his right a good twenty miles off. Already the early morning traffic was beginning to build up, and Regan knew that any attempt to track him now would be almost impossible as he rode the flight lanes down towards Santiago Two One Nine. It was ten minutes short of eight when the copter steadied in its flight, slowed, and then swooped down to the lifting spires of the city. The high roads came up to meet him, the freight traffic black upon them, and moving fast. Within his view were five landing

areas, and the copter knew just which one it wanted. It slanted down, pirouetted in the air, and dropped neatly and safely into the corner reserved for one-man craft.

And now, thought Regan, I have to think for myself.

He realised that he hadn't slept for almost thirty hours, and now that he was safe in the Santiago district, his most pressing need was for a meal and several hours sound sleep. After that—!

Regan stood beside the copter and cursed his own incompetence and short-sightedness. After that—what? He had money, but no papers, no documents, nothing that the official bureaucracy of the city state would require before it would accept him and do his bidding. A cheap, one-night hotel would accommodate him, a restaurant would feed him, a tailor would clothe him, but no one would grant him passage away from Earth. He was alone now—utterly and completely, with ten thousand credits and nowhere to go.

He took the registration key from the copter and went slowly across to the office. A bored, black-skinned clerk checked it against an autolist and handed him a hundred credit note. Regan chuckled to himself in surprise as someone else's deposit went into his pocket.

As he turned away from the office he could feel no surprise when he saw the two men close behind him. Rather it was a confirmation of a nagging doubt that had been at the back of his mind ever since the previous night.

"We have been expecting you, señor," said the taller of the two, with a slight smile.

"And I," said Regan slowly, "am not greatly surprised to find you waiting for me."

"Then we are all satisfied." The man gestured easily with his right hand while his left remained ostentatiously in his jerkin pocket. "If you please."

Regan bowed slightly, and walked towards a row of escalators that led down from the copter roof. For an instant he braced himself to jump into furious action, but he noticed that the second man—a short, tubby sud-americano—stayed well back and out of immediate reach. The plan was obvious. If Regan had tried to jump the man nearest to him and succeeded, he would have little chance against a second opponent standing some ten yards away out of reach and out of immediate contact. They were a competent pair, of that he was sure.

They went down the escalator to the topmost pedestrian route, and then took the twenty mile band of the moving road northwards and out of Santiago district. They travelled for almost an hour while people came and went around them, while crowds gathered and thinned—and always the second man stayed just too far off. They left the roller road, and took another elevator upwards, high into the gleaming spires and the high roads of the freight lanes. There, in a quiet loading bay, the tall, young man ordered Regan into the cab of a giant goods transporter that stood ready and waiting for them. The second man climbed up behind them. The great vehicle was on manual control and the young man handled the bulk of it with expert ease as he swung it out of the bay and on to the wide, slow lane of the high road.

Northwards they went again, slipping from lane to lane until they were roaring at top speed along the fast outer band, and still the direction was northwards. The driver switched the controls to automatic and relaxed in the seat beside Regan.

"Will this trip take long?" Regan asked abruptly.

"Three hours."

"Then I will sleep. Wake me before we arrive."

Regan settled himself into the seat as comfortably as he could, and ignored his two companions. He was feeling tired and dispirited, and the long night without sleep, followed by this—this fiasco, had brought weariness and depression to him which needed to be dispelled before he threw himself into action which would extricate him from the mess into which he had jumped with both feet. The monotonous roar of great motors was only partly shielded from his ears, but it had the effect of lulling him into a deep and dreamless sleep, from which he awoke three hours later dry mouthed but refreshed.

The young man's hand had shaken him gently, and as he eased his cramped body from its position of sleep, Regan asked, "We are arrived?"

"In a few minutes."

The transporter was already sliding across the slower lanes under manual control, its speed reducing as it did so. Their destination was another loading bay, high in the caverns of the city and not far from the high road, but Regan had no idea what district they might be in. Three hours travel to the northward would mean that they had covered around three hundred miles, but that was not sufficient detail for him to fix his

position with any accuracy. They left the transporter and took an elevator up to a copter landing area, and as they went through the portals Regan saw a notice which read, 'San Felipe Three Seven Four,' which at least identified the district as being far away from Santiago.

A four-man copter was waiting for them, and the tall, young man, took the pilot's seat, motioning Regan to sit beside him. Still the fat man stayed well to the rear and said nothing.

"No blindfolds?" queried Regan as the machine moved to its takeoff position.

The young man chuckled appreciatively. "You have been reading too many stories, senor. Would you really be able to find your way back to our destination on the basis of knowing that this is San Felipe Three Seven Four?"

Regan smiled. "No," he admitted.

The copter lifted into the clear, blue air. It was midday and the sun was high overhead, gleaming from the high roads and the towering spires. The field was a white apron below them, receding fast as the machine lifted between the lower flight channels and up into the faster long distance lanes. The young man dialled a code on the control panel, snapped it to automatic and relaxed.

"Half an hour," he said to Regan. "Hardly time for sleep."

"Nevertheless, I will try." Regan settled back once more and, to his surprise, slept again.

This time waking was stale and unpleasant. He had a slight headache, and his mouth was foul and bitter.

"There," said the pilot, pointing ahead, and Regan leaned forward to follow the finger with his own eyes.

The Andes lay ahead, their familiar peaks rising to the sky, and for an instant Regan thought that he might have been approaching Xanadu again. But the skyline was different, the peaks more forbidding, and he could see no pass between them as he had done when they had flown in to Xanadu. The slopes of the mountains were rising sheer beneath them, and Regan could see that which the pilot was indicating.

"I see it," he said.

And indeed he did. Perched high on the rocky slopes, set on a vast ledge that could not have been formed naturally, stood a great, glittering building of white stone, gleaming glass and plastic. It clung to the side of the mountain, high and white and glistening. Where Xanadu was old this was new, and it

flaunted itself in violation of the lonely spendour of the peak which bore it.

The top of it was flat, a great landing area that could have accommodated anything from a small copter to an interplanetary cruiser, and as they swung down Regan could see exactly how great an area was covered by the building as a whole.

He saw gardens within the vast walls, trees and flowers which flaunted their colours in the sunlight, but they were small and out of place here. The man who had built this monolith had cried out for beauty which was denied him by the very nature of his endeavours.

As they landed, Regan turned himself from contemplation of his new prison to a series of rapid, all-seeing glances around the copter roof. If he was to escape—should the chance present itself—then this would be the only way by which he could leave. Ground flight was right out of the question, even if he knew anything about mountain climbing. There were several copters standing in the shadow of the great hangars, and among them Regan spotted two that he could fly himself without any difficulty should the chance come to him.

The house below the copter roof was light and modern and airy, but somehow it was overshadowed by the great brooding peak above it. Unseen though it was, the mountain overawed the house and all within it.

The two men shepherded Regan into a vast lounge, one wall of which was all glass. Beyond the glass a small flower garden added colour to the room, and beyond the garden the mountain slope fell away, down and down, sheer and precipitous, to the upper levels of the city state that blurred in the midday haze far below.

"You will wait here," said the young man, and abruptly Regan was alone.

For an instant he thought of trying immediate flight, but he put the idea aside as impracticable for the moment. He crossed to the vast window and looked out of it at the immense scene before him, imagining, as he did so, how the owner of this place might stand or sit for hour upon hour, brooding on his wealth and power, brooding on his superiority over his fellow men who bred and spawned, lived and died, in the gleaming prison of their own making far below this false eyrie.

From behind him a door whispered open, but Regan didn't bother to turn round.

"Good day, senor." The voice was deep and sonorous ; it commanded a respect that Regan was not prepared to give.

He stifled the urge to turn round, and kept his position in front of the window. Quietly, he remarked, "You must be a very unhappy man, senor."

"I do not understand."

"You need this vast window to remind you that you have escaped from the world out there. But does it tell you that you will die one day, just as those over whom you have power will die ?"

"You are insolent."

Regan smiled and counted the first round to himself as he turned to face the other man. He was big, an athlete once perhaps, but now his heavily muscled body was running to unhealthy fat with a paunch that could not be concealed by the perfect cut of his immaculate white suit. The face was dark-skinned and heavily jowelled, with deep, black eyes that gleamed through pudgy rolls of fat, above a large, hooked nose that only accentuated the cruelty of the overall impression.

"Insolence is relative," Regan retorted idly. "I might think that you are insolent for daring to remove me against my will. What is your name ?"

"I am called Malatest." The man eased his heavy body into a chair and waved Regan to another. "Just why did you leave Xanadu, Senor Cabrera ?"

Regan sat astounded.

thirteen

For an instant he wondered if his ears were playing him tricks. Malatest sat and regarded him, brooding and serious, and Regan had to convince himself that he had not been mistaken. Why did he leave Xanadu ? He felt an insane desire to laugh, and for once he was quite at a loss for words.

"I am puzzled," said Malatest. "Two years away from your family and you leave within the day on a wild goose chase that was so transparent that I laughed when it was suggested to me." He leaned forward in his seat. "Why did you leave Xanadu ?"

Regan sat quiet.

"I find your attitude ridiculous," snapped Malatest.

" And I find yours ludicrous."

" Señor Cabrera, your life is in my hands. Once you have opened the carrier I can kill you and that would be the end of the family Cabrera. You know that, yet you walk into a trap that was so transparently obvious that I am at a loss to know how it reaped success."

So, Malatest had the carrier. That was another piece of information that Regan could store away. And it hadn't been opened. Slowly, the pieces fell into place.

Regan knew enough about personal carriers to realise that the one that Manuel Cabrera had been using would be one of the latest type, geared to his person in such a manner that no one but the owner could open it without destroying the contents so utterly that they would be of no use to anyone. There were methods of opening them, so Regan had heard, but they were long and costly operations requiring scientific and technical skill of an extremely high degree—and then success could not be guaranteed.

No wonder the person of Manuel Cabrera was so important.

" Have you nothing to say ?" demanded Malatest.

For an instant Regan was tempted to say, 'I am not Cabrera,' but he bit the words back. He couldn't prove it, and in the unlikely event of him being believed he would at once cease to be important to the brooding man before him. And once his apparent importance was gone . . .

" You must have an efficient organisation within the walls of Xanadu," he said at last.

Malatest shrugged deprecatingly.

" And do you imagine that I will open the carrier for you without some guarantee of my personal safety ?"

Malatest chuckled. " You are in no position to ask for guarantees, Cabrera. All I want are the contents of that carrier. With them I have the family Cabrera within the palm of my hand—that is why we have waited so long, over two years, to bring you and the carrier together." He rose to his feet. " I can wait a little longer. You may stay here and admire the view. I expect the carrier to arrive early tomorrow, and when it comes we will talk again."

He walked heavily from the room, and the door closed behind him. Bare seconds later it opened again, and a servant came in carrying a large, covered tray which he set on a table before bowing and going out again. Regan crossed to the table

and lifted the cover. At least they didn't intend him to starve.

He sat down and ate with relish, realising that more than twelve hours had passed since his last meal at Xanadu.

Xanadu !

The tangled web of his position had grown worse these last few minutes. Malatest had organised his removal from Xanadu—and then asked him why he had left. Malatest thought he was Manuel Cabrera—yet the person who had planted the recorder in his room had known that he was not. The unknown voice on the tape had wanted him in Malatest's hands—yet Malatest himself had been kept in the dark. But why ? If Malatest didn't know his real identity then he would go ahead and make him open the carrier—and if that happened then the contests would be destroyed—

Regan sat bolt upright in his chair.

—which was exactly what Cabrera wanted.

Pedro and the others at the dinner party had jumped the gun because of their own ignorance, but the old man had known what he was doing all along. He'd had a week aboard the ship from Ferroval to sort it out, and by the time they reached Xanadu he had put his plan into operation straight away. Force Regan away from Xanadu, tip off the opposition, and at one stroke he would remove both causes of his own personal embarrassment.

Regan cursed himself for falling into such a trap so easily. Yet he had to admire the ingenuity with which old Cabrera had handled the situation.

He relaxed and ate the food which had cooled during his reverie. An old saying about jumping out of a frying pan into a fire brought a grim smile to his lips, and he reflected that he could hardly be in a worse position than he was at this very moment. Surprisingly, the thought didn't worry him as much as it would have done a few weeks—or even a few days—ago. The new-born confidence he had in his own abilities was such that he even felt a certain relish, a peculiar excitement, at the prospect of danger and conflict.

One thing was certain ; old Cabrera had no use for him—except in so far as Regan could accomplish the old man's aims. Malatest would have no use for him once he knew how unimportant was the man who was his prisoner.

Regan finished his meal with more enjoyment than should have been possible under the circumstances, and when it was done he lay down on the luxurious divan that stood to one side of the great window. He felt happier than he had done for a long time.

He slept again, more comfortably this time, and when he awoke darkness had fallen. He rose from the divan, and through the great window he could see the glittering, fairy lights of the city state far below ; there was acre upon acre of pinpoint stars, gleaming and winking, spreading out towards the far horizon where they merged with the distance so that even Regan's alien eyes could not separate them one from another. His sleep had refreshed him ; his confidence was greater than it had ever been ; and the night was his ally.

His watch told him that it was eight in the evening. The city state would be waking to its night hours of pleasure and entertainment.

Tomorrow, Malatest had said, would see the arrival of the carrier—and tomorrow night would be too late.

Regan turned from the window and crossed to the door. Not unexpectedly it was locked from the other side. He smiled to himself and took the handle in both hands, twisting hard in both directions alternately, working with all his strength to exert unequal stresses and strains upon the mechanism. The tension was hard on his upper arms, but the lower, false forearms, the alien wrists and hands and muscles took the power he thrust out and transmitted it effortlessly into sheer strength. The lock creaked, gave a little, creaked again, and twisted itself to ruins with a metallic grating that made Regan wince with apprehension.

Beyond the door the corridor was brightly lit but empty, and he paused for a brief second, his ears straining for any sound that something might be coming to investigate the noise of the shattered lock. No one came.

Satisfied, he stepped back into the room and closed the door behind him. On the wall beside the door a tiny panel with six small buttons on it revealed the control for the rooms lighting. From the tray bearing the remains of his meal Regan took the small thin bladed fruit knife and dug around the edge of the lighting panel, chipping and scraping at the plastic of the wall to separate the panel from it. He worked a small hole large enough to admit two fingers, and with a single wrench of the

first and seconds digits of his right hand he jerked the panel away from the magnetic clips which held it in place. At the back of the panel the main power connections showed as two bright nodules against the black rear portion of the control.

The small knife was useless to him now, and Regan took the blade between his fingers and broke off a small piece about two inches long. He slid it on to the magnetic clips at the back of the panel so that it lay across both power terminals when the panel was put back into place. A brief check on the corridor outside showed that it was still empty, and Regan stepped back into the room. Moving quickly, he slammed the light panel back into position and a satisfying gloom immediately enveloped the room and the corridor beyond. The plate was in position, and it would take a close inspection to tell just where the trouble was. Regan thanked his stars that some slight knowledge was left to him from the boring hours spent in college technical laboratories.

The dark glasses went into his jerkin pocket as he stepped out of the room, and already there were voices raised close at hand—Malatest's stentorian tones ringing above the rest. The way to the copter roof lay to the left and Regan headed in that direction silently and fast. He got to the first corner when Malatest appeared—and with him were the two men who had escorted Regan from Santiago earlier that day.

The darkened corridor was lit only by a torch carried by the tall, young man, and Regan saw them long before they spotted him. Their one impression could only have been of a fast moving form which hit them out of the darkness with the speed and violence of a leaping cat. The young man tried to get at a weapon in his jerkin pocket, and he screamed in agony as Regan smashed his upper arm with one ironhard fist. The tubby sud-americano backed off a yard and tried to move faster than Regan. He failed, and went silently to the ground, his skull fractured and bleeding under the sheer ferocity of Regan's attack.

Malatest never had a chance. The brief seconds gained for him by his two henchmen sealed his own fate, for he managed to draw a needle gun from his pocket, and was struggling to take a steady aim in pitch darkness when Regan hit him from the rear. The side of one hand caught him across the back of

the neck, and the sharp, ugly snap told Regan that Malatest was no more.

The corridor lay open before him, and at the far end was the door and stairway which led to the copter roof. Regan started for the roof, but before he had gone two paces men issued from a side door ahead of him, arguing loudly among themselves. The light of the three hand torches was not enough for their needs, and Regan was among them, raging murderously, before they even realised that all was not as it should have been. Two dropped soundlessly to the floor under the first onslaught, a third hit the wall with a bone-shattering crash that broke several ribs and rendered him unconscious, a fourth tried to fight back and had his face smashed in by one vicious punch from Regan's left first. The last two had their heads cracked together—and the way to the roof was clear.

The stairs were in darkness as Regan ascended them, and the darkness extended across the entire expanse of roof. He smiled in relief that the emergency lighting had not yet been brought into operation, and ran hard and fast from the cover of the doorway across to the hangar that he had seen earlier in the day. The great doors were still open and the copters in much the same position as they had been when he first saw them. That, at least, was something to be thankful for.

"Hey, what's going on down there?" The man was on him from the open entrance before Regan realised it, so engrossed had he been in the copters. "What the hell—?" The words were cut off abruptly as Regan leapt across the two yards of space that separated them, and laid the speaker unconscious.

The way was clear.

He headed for the nearer of the two craft that he had picked out, and climbed into the cabin. A quick check of the controls revealed that all was well, but the apprehension built suddenly within him as he tried to start the motors and nothing happened. Perhaps it was under repair and he hadn't noticed? Perhaps—? But speculation was no good, and Regan dropped out of the cabin and went to the second copter, his heart thumping in an agony of anticipation. In the tiny cabin of this, the smaller of the two machines, he hesitated for a bare second while his lips pursed and his hands trembled a little with sheer desperation.

He hit the starter button and let out a deep breath of relief as the motor throbbed into life behind him. He wheeled the machine out of the hangar and across to the centre of the takeoff area.

Above him the sky was clear and the stars were brilliant. He switched more power to the great rotors, and the motor whined in higher pitch ; the copter lurched under his less than expert handling, and lifted itself clear of the roof. Somewhere behind him a metallic clang sounded in the tiny cabin, and Regan looked back in alarm to see a bunch of men issuing from the door through which he had so recently come. The dark outline of the copter was enough to give them a target, and more than one of them was firing.

Regan prayed that none of them had anything more deadly than a missile gun, and swung the copter down and outwards from the evil eyrie, heading down the mountain slope, below the level of the roof so that they would have no target. The rocky slopes sped beneath the speeding craft, and Regan sweated for an age before he dared to lift the craft from its dangerously low flight path, and swing it high again into the clear night air.

He looked back and saw the lights playing along the roof of the vast monolith, but he was too far off now to be in any danger. A chuckle of relief sprang from his lips, a chuckle that developed into a laugh of sheer exhilaration. He was part drunk with elation and excitement, and he recognised the symptoms of emotion which had swept him like a tornado through the last few vicious minutes of his existence. In ten minutes he had done and dared more than in the whole of his life before—the feeling was good.

He relaxed at the controls, flying the machine manually and erratically, uncertain in the flush of his success where he should head for or what he should do. Before him lay the district of San Felipe with its sheltering crowds ; above him lay the clear night sky. He looked up at it, seeking out familiar stars among the timeless constellations, and tasting the freedom of his position.

And then—he saw the ship.

fourteen

It showed only as a great, black blotch against the sky, a hole in space blanketing the stars beyond it. It was low, far lower than any vessels of its size had any right to be unless it was on some special mission in the immediate neighbourhood, and Regan realised grimly and hopelessly that it was. It had to be heading for the now darkened roof of Malatest's castle; probably it brought the carrier which was the cause of so much trouble and so much death; perhaps . . .

Instinctively, Regan swung the copter away on another course, heading he knew not where, but anxious to get out of the immediate area of anything which might threaten his newfound freedom. He looked up again.

The ship was moving with him.

Desperately, he pushed more power through the motors, and the copter responded with a burst of acceleration that sent shudders through its frame. He eased back on the controls and realised hopelessly that he couldn't make it. The dark shadow swept down upon him, piloted with supreme nonchalance by someone who knew his job far better than did Regan. The lights of the city state were still too far off—too far for any use they might have been to Regan. He flew low, trying to dodge and weave, to gain a few vital seconds and yards that might see him safe, for he knew that if he got close enough to the populous area ahead then his pursuers would be forced to let him off the hook.

He never had a chance.

Timing its dive to a fraction, the dark craft swept down on him, and before he had time to act the motor cut out behind him, and only the whine of the rotors relieved the sudden silence. The copter fell away and slid sideways. Regan wrestled with the controls with a desperation born of fear, and his heart pounded with horror as the ground rushed up to meet him. He didn't see the sudden swoop of the ship above him, nor the cascading snare of the magnetic grapples that plummeted around the copter. There was a frightening clang as the body of the machine was enveloped in the metallic web that issued, spiderlike, from the belly of the ship. The idly spinning rotors thrashed themselves to pieces in a second, and the copter hung motionless, swaying slightly, in a vast silence with only the rush of air and the creaking of metal to add eerie sound effects to Regan's hopelessness.

The ground fell away as the ship made height. The dark body came down upon him as the vessel drew its captive into its own great hull. There was a muffled clamour as the grappling unit drew the copter into its resting place, and the light from outside the ship faded as the cargo hatch slid into place beneath. Regan sat still and waited. The grapple set the copter gently down on the now solid deck, and then fell away as the power was cut off. The copter lurched, groaned, and settled at a canting angle.

Desperation made Regan move swiftly from his seat. He slid open the copter door and jumped down to the metal deck ; the lights were dim around him, and to one side he could see a ladder leading up to a door set high above. Away to the left a great pair of double doors led through to another cargo hatch and he knew well that they would be firmly closed. His one way out lay through the door at the top of the ladder. His one way . . . and he knew that it was no chance at all.

He took the stairs two at a time, and he was only halfway up them when the door slid open and two figures stood illuminated by the glare from the corridor beyond. Regan stopped in mid-flight, and the two men stood looking at him from above—a frozen tableau of surprise—each trying to assimilate what his eyes told him to be untrue.

“ Carlo !” whispered Regan blankly.

The black man stepped forward and looked down at him with eyes that were blank with surprise beneath brows high lifted. Yet even the surprise could not shake him utterly.

“ Re-you.” His voice mirrored his astonishment, yet his mind was still in control. “ What the devil—”

“ What the hell are you doing here ?” snarled Regan.

“ You—you escaped ?”

“ How did you know I was a prisoner ? How did you know where to look for me ?” The pent up fear that had been with Regan since the minute he had spotted the black bulk of the ship, slid from him in an overwhelming rush of fury. This was the last thing he had expected, but now that he was faced with it he recalled his conclusions back in Malatest’s castle. The old man was here to reap his reward for the duplicity he had displayed ; how, Regan didn’t know, nor, in his blind rage did he stop to wonder.

He mounted the rest of the stairway in four great leaps, and Carlo gave ground before him. The other man was a white-

faced crew member in officer's uniform, who stood aside, cringing almost from the violence written in every line and in every muscle of Regan's body.

"Don't be too hasty, cousin," snapped Carlo. He stood his ground with a solidity that slowed Regan in his tracks. "We came here to take you out, but it seems our rescue wasn't necessary."

The words jolted Regan to some semblance of sanity. He recalled the surprise in Carlo's eyes as they had looked at each other across half the length of the stairway. Yet, should he not have looked surprised? The last person he would have expected to see away from Malatest's domain would have been Regan.

"Your—father will wish to see you," said Carlo quietly.

"The old man? He is here?"

"Yes." Carlo smiled thinly. "He is very angry."

"He'll be angrier still when he knows that I am here."

Carlo shrugged helplessly. "I cannot tell you all that has passed and led us here. I doubt that you would believe me anyway. Come, we will go to old Cabrera."

Reluctantly, Regan followed Carlo along the brightly lit corridor of the ship. Now that his anger had faded a little he knew that there were too many questions that had to be asked, too many inconsistencies. There was an unreal air of confidence that made him bleakly suspicious of the family Cabrera; and yet, why should they have appeared on the scene in this manner if all the old man had wanted was to see the carrier destroyed? There was no profit in his being so precipitous. All he had needed to do was to sit back and wait. True, Regan might have been killed, but the stakes were clearly so high that the death of one such interloper—albeit unwitting—would hardly have caused the family Cabrera much lost sleep.

The corridor divided, and Carlo took the right branch. Some ten yards along it ended in a large metal door which slid open on silent bearings as they approached. Carlo stepped through and paused with Regan standing behind him and in the shadow of the entrance.

"I have a surprise for you, uncle, and for you, Armand." He stood aside and allowed Regan to enter the cabin.

The old man sat at a desk on the far side, and Armand stood to one side. They both looked from Carlo to Regan, and the surprise that Carlo had earlier shown was repeated on their

faces as Regan stood looking at them with grim anger.

"Regan!" The old man was the first to speak. The surprise was replaced by an expression of relief that spread across his creased, weathered face—a relief that was so obvious and so genuine that Regan felt only confusion where moments earlier there had been only anger.

"Sit down, sit down. I had feared you to be dead."

"And the carrier destroyed?" Regan sat down beside the desk. He saw Armand and Carlo exchange glances that could only be described as sheepish, and the whole atmosphere within the cabin was totally different to the reception he had expected.

"Yes," agreed Cabrera, "and the carrier destroyed."

"Then you are doubly disappointed. I have not seen the carrier."

The old man sighed, his eyes fluttered and looked away from Regan with every sign of acute embarrassment. "I owe you the most heartfelt apology that I can offer on behalf of the family, Regan. This was none of my doing, though, when you left Xanadu, I knew exactly what was to happen."

"I doubt that you were surprised."

"I was surprised that any kin of mine could so easily sully the honour which the family Cabrera possesses." The words were bitten out with a sudden scorn as the old eyes turned in utter contempt on the sheepish figures of Armand and Carlo. "Regan, this plan was suggested to me by my nephews while we were on route from Ferroval to Earth. They put it forward as being the only means to ensure the destruction of Manuel's carrier. I would not agree to it since I knew that its success could only result in your death."

Regan looked in amazement at the other two.

"Once we had arrived at Xanadu they took it upon themselves to put into operation this—this wretched scheme which I had already vetoed. They did it without my knowledge, and, once I heard of it, I took such steps as were necessary to put right the wrong which they had done you."

"How did you know where to find me?"

"The watch which I gave to you," said Armand wearily, "it is also a direction indicator. We knew exactly where you were from the moment you left Xanadu."

"I see."

"Regan," said the old man, "I asked you once if you were surprised that I should believe in God. I ask you now to believe that, as God is my witness, I would have done you no such wrong as you have suffered. My fear was that I might be too late."

"You reckoned without me," snapped Regan. "Did you know that Malatest was your opponent?"

"Malatest is nothing," said Carlo. "He is a known quantity to us—an agent of the colony worlds who believed that he was operating in secret behind a commercial facade. It was not hard to fool him with our scheme." The black man turned, suddenly, away from him. "I, too, would offer my apologies, Regan. I was too anxious to see the carrier destroyed before some scientific idiot found a way to open it."

"The castle was in darkness when we arrived," said the old man, a question plain in his voice.

"Dead men lie better in the dark," retorted Regan.

"Malatest?"

"Among others. His neck is broken."

"A pity, he was but a pawn in the game," said Cabrera. "If I could have tamed him with my presence we might have turned this sorry business to some advantage."

Regan sat quiet and considered what he learned. He had no reason to disbelieve the old man, and, now that he thought about it, the scheme smelled more strongly of Armand and Carlo. It was such a thing as they would have done, coldly and with considered implication. To them Regan was not important, but to the old man he was another human being—someone who found himself embroiled in a situation that was not of his own making. No, old Cabrera could never have been a party to it.

Regan pursed his lips and his anger faded; even his two 'cousins' were safe from his vengeance now, and only the dead and injured in Malatest's eyrie testified to the failure of their ideas.

"What now?" he asked.

"We go to Xanadu," said the old man.

"And then?"

"The future will need to be thought on." The old eyes looked at him steadily. "For the moment—will you be my son once more?"

Regan looked at Carlo and the black man nodded slightly and reassuringly, he had acted in defiance of his uncle's wishes—but he would not do so again.

"All right," agreed Regan, "but on one condition."

"If it is within my power."

"Just now Carlo mentioned the colony worlds," said Regan. "A slip that I would have thought him incapable of making. I want to know how they are concerned in this matter; I want to know the whole story—what I am involved in, who you are fighting." He gazed bleakly at the old man. "You owe me something, Cabrera, and this shall be your payment."

"It is none of your affair," snapped Armand.

"It nearly cost me my life—no thanks to you."

"This is a family matter, uncle," protested Carlo. "We cannot trust an outsider."

"I think this man is as much like my son as makes no matter. I do not think he will betray our trust."

"But, uncle—"

"Be silent." The old man looked sombrely at Regan. "Knowledge can be a dangerous thing—a possession which one may regret once one had obtained it. Are you sure that you desire such danger?"

"Knowledge can save lives," Regan retorted. "It can save mine in the future, if I have it."

The old man looked at the desk before him, considering the request. "We shall be back at Xanadu within two hours," he said quietly. "It will be almost midnight." He was silent for a long minute. "I will sleep on it, Regan. Tomorrow, we will talk again."

fifteen

As a homecoming it has its disadvantages. The family were still waiting for them when the ship reached Xanadu, and Regan had to play his part of Manuel Cabrera with a solemnity that he found distasteful.

The deep, violet eyes of Giselle mocked him above her red lips as she murmured her thankfulness that he was safe. The old lady expressed her pleasure with a sincerity that Regan was forced to believe—she could have acted no other way.

His 'uncle,' Pedro, snapped at him, "You are too hasty for your own good. Why could you not have confided in us before running off on such a wild goose chase?"

"What would you have done if I had told you about Malatest?" demanded Regan, playing his part to the limit of his ability.

"Enough, Pedro," interrupted the old man. "Manuel did what he thought was right. That he failed was as much my fault as his. And now—we are all tired."

Regan went up to the room he had left twenty-four hours earlier. The bed was soft under his body, and he realised for the first time just how much had been taken out of him by his exertions of the past hours. He wondered how much Giselle knew—and how much she guessed.

He slept deeply and late ; he didn't wake until the sun was high in the sky, and the hands of the wall clock showed the hour was almost ten. His toilet was leisurely as he savoured the anticipation of his next meeting with the old man. There was little doubt in his mind that Cabrera would tell him what he wanted to know. And once he had that knowledge—! Regan had made no plans, indeed without knowing more, planning was quite out of the question, but he was grimly sure that there would be something that he could turn to his own advantage.

The realisation of his motives shocked him a little, for previously he had only wanted to get out and away, back to Caledon, back to his home ; but that was in the past. Regan hardly realised himself how much he had changed over the past ten days. Ten days ! Two hundred and forty hours ago he had been in the hospital on Ferroval. Lippman had been his guide and companion, his mentor, the man on whom he had leaned for support. The world outside had been a frightening place in which he would show his tortured face only briefly. He had been frightened, tormented with alien limbs and alien senses that he didn't understand—with scars and obscenities that cried out to be hidden. And now ? Dead men lay behind him; the strength of his body had brought strength to his mind ; he feared nothing and no man—not even Cabrera !

He was the last to take breakfast in the wide, sunny dining room, and Carlo and Armand waited for him with ill-concealed impatience while he ate leisurely and hugely from the food which was available.

When he had finished, Carlo said, "Come. My uncle waits for us in his study."

Regan followed the two men along the wide, sunlit corridors, and up a flight of stairs to a room high in the west turret corner of the great house. There old Cabrera had his private domain. The great arched windows dominated a view that showed Xanadu in all its glory. The high peaks gleamed in the distance, and close at hand the rolling green of the valley spread away in verdant splendour. The old man had his desk set sideways to the window so that he could look out of it as he sat and worked. The room was in keeping with the rest of the house—large, antique and comfortable.

As they entered, Cabrera looked up from his desk and laid aside the sheaf of documents which he had been reading.

"You have slept late." The old man waved to a chair—one of four which circled the desk. "That is good. Please, sit here."

"Is there any point in my sitting down?" asked Regan, standing his ground just within the door.

"You are too sensitive, brother." Regan turned his head in surprise, and saw the slim form of Giselle rise from a shadowed corner. She was dressed in riding clothes and her hair hung black and untidy around her shoulders.

"Is this a joke, Cabrera?" demanded Regan.

"Gently, gently." The old man waved a brown, withered hand. "As Giselle has said, you are too sensitive, Regan. I have slept on your request, and I think that you have earned an explanation."

Regan relaxed; he crossed the short space of heavily carpeted floor and took the seat offered to him. Giselle sauntered across and sat next to him. Armand and Carlo sat beyond her.

"Before I begin," the dark, old eyes bored into Regan's with a cold implacability that was almost hypnotic, "I would warn you once again that knowledge can be dangerous."

Regan said nothing.

"What can you hope to gain?" asked Cabrera.

"Power," retorted Regan.

The old man leaned back in his chair and looked out of the wide window. "There is an old saying, Regan, which asks, what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world—and lose his soul? Have you heard of it?"

"Two weeks ago," said Regan, "I was a mental cripple. All I wanted was to flee back to Caledon and lose myself amid the tidy

familiarities of home. I wanted to hide this face of mine from all save those who knew me well enough to love me for what I was. In the last ten days, since first I saw you in the apartment on Ferroval, I have seen power, Cabrera—such power as I never dreamed existed. I have killed men who, two weeks ago, would have killed me as easily as they would have stamped on an insect. I have been reborn in a new guise, and one which doesn't frighten me any more." He looked sombrely at the old man. "Does that answer you?"

Cabrera sighed and nodded. "So be it. Regan, what do you think of Earth?"

"Until I saw Xanadu I hated it."

"And so do I—all of it—save Xanadu." He swivelled his chair so that he could look out of the window. "Once, long ago, most of Earth was like this, until the human race despoiled it. Have you heard of Malthus?"

Regan shook his head.

"Malthus was a philosopher who, centuries ago, foresaw the explosion of population which was to come. He saw it and warned of it, but no one heeded him until it was too late—"

"I read history in college," said Regan shortly. And indeed he had. As the old man spoke he recalled old lessons and old facts that had been long forgotten; he remembered the wars that had served only to increase the spread of population. And as the plague of Man had spread, only space flight and new planets had served as a safety valve against a final, utter collapse of civilisation through economic shortages. He had read of the riots that had swept the continents when population control had at last been rigidly enforced, and the population stabilised—as far as was possible—at forty billions who eked out a bare existence from the sea farms, the untold cubic miles of ocean that was all that stood between them and death by starvation.

And still the human race had expanded—outwards through the nearer stars, the distances spanned by great fleets of ships who served, in turn, to spread the growing might of Man across strange worlds and alien planets.

The old man's voice droned on through the morning sun as he painted the picture in Regan's mind of a growing monster that could only be controlled by laws and repressions, by a semi-dictatorial policy which allowed only one end—and that end was a Universe controlled by Earth herself.

All the seeking for new planets, the race to colonise them, the hard, back-breaking work to fit them for habitation by Man, had only one end in view—to make them fit to produce food and raw materials for the ever hungry maw of the mother world.

"The human race is greedy, Regan," said Cabrera, "and there are none more greedy in the universe than we of Earth. The output and production of two score worlds has only one end in view—the needs of Earth. And Earth becomes more demanding with each passing day. Is that why you dislike Earth? Is that why you dislike its people? They take and demand, and take again. They take because they believe it is their right to take. They found the colony worlds, and they sent forth their emigrants to take possession of them. In return those planets shall pour forth their life blood that Earth may continue to live in its present squalor and degradation.

"One thing has not been thought of, Regan—at least, not by the men who govern this unhappy planet. The colony worlds have dreams and ambitions of their own, and these will not be realised while they are battened on by a vampire which drains them of all they need themselves. Already, there is a harsh resentment to be found. Tell me, is Earth still loved on Caledon?"

Wordlessly, Regan shook his head.

"No, not on Caledon, nor on Ferroval, nor on any world that is more than one generation removed from her. The movement is growing against Earth, Regan, and one day it will be turned from thoughts into deeds. One day the supplies are going to fall off; the great fleets will start to return half empty, the economy of a colony world is going to mean more than the appetite of Earth. And when that day comes—" the old voice trailed off in a whisper of dread anticipation.

Regan realised that he had been sitting with tensed muscles for almost an hour. He relaxed slowly. "If you see this, why not others?"

"Some do, some who, like me, fear for the future of our race. And some of us are prepared to act, to do something that may stave off the final collapse of human civilisation, for that is what will happen if there is conflict between Earth and the colony worlds. One thing is sure—neither will survive without the other."

"The collapse of the human race has been talked of for many centuries," Regan said. "Isn't it possible that this crisis you foresee will be little different from all the others?"

The old man's eyes flickered at him, and Regan read briefly a message of stark despair within their ancient depths that shocked him beyond measure.

"Yes, it will be very different."

Regan glanced sideways at Carlo, but the black man's face was cold and dead.

"Over the past twenty years," went on Cabrera, "there has been emerging a crucial factor—a small one at the moment, one which is neither generally known nor generally accepted. The Central Government has received reports, but these, like most things which are detrimental to bureaucracy, have been shelved, lost, hidden under a mass of documentation."

"And that factor is?"

The old man sighed. "The Earth has become a city state, Regan, the open lands are gone forever unless the state is broken. The green fields and the woods, the forests and the flowers and the grass—these are no more, save here, in Xanadu and a few other such places. What happens when the ecological balance of a world is destroyed and distorted beyond recognition?"

Regan felt a tremor of unease as he shook his head.

"I will tell you as much as I already know, and much that I fear. First, there has been a loss of one fifth of one per cent in the oxygen content in the terran atmosphere during the last twenty years—a small figure, I agree, but one which is growing faster as time passes. I have had estimates based on scientific investigations from reputable physicists that the figure will accelerate to reach one fourth of one per cent within the next five years."

"And the Terran Government knows about this?" said Regan, aghast. "And they do nothing?"

The old man shrugged. "There is talk of producing oxygen by artificial means to reinforce the output from natural sources—the sea farms and the few wild areas like Xanadu."

Regan nodded grimly. He could well imagine the fumbling efforts that would be the result of bureaucracy trying to right its own wrongs.

"Go on," he said.

"The second factor is the humidity which is dropping because of the success of climatic control. No one wants rain any more; save in small amounts to clean the city spires during

the night hours. In any event, the rainfall of olden times would not be sufficient to supply all our needs and to fill the reservoirs. The sea provides all the water we want, and the loss of rain affects the humidity, the loss of humidity affects the cloud formations, and the end result is an overall rise in temperature of about a half a degree which cannot be reconciled with any other known factor affecting local and planetary temperatures. The atmosphere, Regan, is drying up thanks to human interference.

"The third, and perhaps the most disturbing factor, is the change wrought on the average terran as a result of the enforced artificial diet to which he has been subjected during the past ten decades. Only about one person in a hundred eats food that has been produced naturally, the rest are stuffed with synthetics, vitamins, minerals, proteins—all that is necessary to sustain life, yet none of it containing the elements of life itself. For years this planet has been unable to import sufficient foodstuffs to maintain its whole population. It has had to resort to the artificial methods of production and to the meagre output of the sea farms.

"One day, despite all our efforts and all our knowledge, there will be an epidemic of some disease that we had thought was dead—some mutated virus that cannot be fought by the diet and the health of the average terran." The old man paused and shook his head. "It is a matter of knowledge born of the dead years, that nature fights back—and when that happens we see her in her bitterest and most terrible attire. Man's conquest of her can, at best, be only temporary—an uneasy balance that can be upset by a straw blown in the wind. And in that mythical straw lies the seeds of our own destruction."

"The colony worlds know all this?" asked Regan.

"Yes," admitted Cabrera. "Those that hate us know of it all too well."

"And they will do nothing?"

"No, they wait only to feast upon the corpse that will remain. They may wait ten years, twenty, fifty, but they know that it will happen eventually, and they buy their time by acceding to Earth's demands for food and raw materials; they gamble their present economy for a future in which Earth's domination will be broken and dead, when the city state will collapse and the riches that are crowded on this planet will fall into their hands

because there will be no one to stop them." The dark, old eyes stared unwinking at Regan. "And yet I think they have miscalculated."

"How?"

"This thing for which they wait will be slow to come, and when at last it does Earth will be strong and will realise the fate that awaits her. She will demand more help from the colony worlds, more food, more raw materials. She will demand the evacuation of large portions of her population so that there can be a tearing down of the city state, and a return to the old days of the open lands, of green and growing things, of wide fields and tall trees. But," the old voice dropped to a whisper, "it will be too late."

Regan felt an ice-cold wind blowing through him, sending shudders along his muscles as if he was sitting in an icy room.

"There will be war," he said. "The colony worlds wouldn't take any more."

Cabrera nodded silently.

"And if there is a war it will be the end of Mankind."

Again Cabrera nodded.

Regan rose stiffly from his chair and turned towards the window. The noonday sun shone bright and clear upon the green vista of Xanadu, but for him it might have been mid-winter. He chuckled slightly to himself and missed the frown of surprise from Carlo, and the quick, hard stare of Giselle. He had asked—and he had been answered. He recalled his thoughts of the previous night ; he thought of his insistence to be told what he was involved in ; his idea that he might learn something to his own personal advantage.

And all he had obtained was a preview to the death of Mankind—one way or another.

s i x t e e n

When he turned back from the window they were all watching him. Carlo and the old man coldly ; Giselle with her violet eyes that seemed to be laughing mockingly from her austere face ; and Armand with a hard, tight smile on his thin features.

"You were warned last night, Regan," said Armand. "Yet you insisted. Do you think that this knowledge is of use to you ?"

Regan ignored the sarcasm. "Just how was Manuel involved in all this?" he asked.

"He believed that he had the answer," replied Carlo.

"And what is the answer?"

"We never knew. He would not confide in us."

"Strange of him to mistrust his cousins," taunted Regan.

"He would not even trust his own father," said the old man, and there was in his voice admonition for Regan that didn't go unnoticed.

"You did not know him," said Carlo. "Underneath that easy, happy facade with which he faced the world, was a hard man, a man who knew what he wanted, Regan, who knew where he was going. He had a brilliant mind, cold and analytical—and he treated the rest of the family as nonentities, unworthy even of consideration."

"He was killed because someone didn't want him to find the answer." Regan stared bleakly at Carlo.

"Yes."

"And the answer may lie in his missing carrier."

"Almost certainly."

"And that is why Malatest and the colony worlds want to get hold of it so badly."

"No," said Cabrera. "They wanted it destroyed along with my son. They came by its possession purely accidentally, as a direct result of your survival. Now that they have it they want to know what they might be up against with Manuel still alive."

Regan walked slowly across the room, his head sunk in thought. The picture was growing clearer as his questions were answered, the facade was being stripped away and the ugly scene beneath was being laid bare.

"Which is why you want Manuel alive. If he is alive, then his carrier is very important to those who have it, because they can learn from it just what his secrets were—"

"If they can open it," added Armand.

"And they may not try to do that while there is a chance of them bringing together Manuel and his carrier." Regan cocked an eye at Carlo. "Can they open it without Manuel's presence? I have heard that there are ways."

"It is possible," admitted Carlo, "though the danger of utter destruction is very great. It is a risk that they would be loath to take unless they were forced to it."

"And they would be forced to do it if Manuel were dead." Regan nodded. "And all of this was why I was sent off on a wild goose chase. You wanted the carrier destroyed as quickly as possible, before the secret of my identity got out."

Carlo nodded.

Regan sat down again. The vision was building up inside his mind of a man with a dream that he would not share with anyone. A man who saw himself as a knight in shining armour, perched upon a white horse, riding out to save Mankind from the dragon of its own making. At first, it had been merely a case of stopping Manuel, of destroying him and his ideas . . .

Abruptly, Regan asked, "How can anyone be sure—outside the family—that Manuel's secret died with him?"

The old man smiled coldly. "Regan, we are not alone in this thing. There are others with us, and others against us. Do you think that they do not watch us? Do you think that we do not watch them? Why do you think that Manuel was so secretive—why did he trust no one? Have you any idea of the intrigue, the spying, the deceit, the mistrust, the secrecy, which rule our lives?" He shook his head. "No, Regan, you are a child in these matters. They thought that Manuel's secret had died with him, and they were happy that it should be so, until he was reborn on Lichar, and then the whole game began again. Manuel's secret was not destroyed, Manuel himself was not dead. Do you wonder that I keep your true identity as secret as I can? Do you wonder that I want Manuel alive?"

"But why try to destroy the carrier?" Regan insisted. "If it is lost to you then you can do nothing."

"If it is opened by others then Manuel's secrets and ideas are dead for ever," said Carlo. "If it is destroyed unopened then there is still a chance that we will find some clue that will lead along the path that he trod."

"Do you really believe that?" sneered Regan.

Only silence greeted him.

He thought of the knight in shining armour, and the picture didn't agree with the words that Carlo had used in speaking of him—a hard man with a brilliant mind, cold and analytical. He must have known what obstacles he was likely to meet, what enemies he would create if he solved the problem of the city state. The colony worlds didn't want a solution—they wanted

Earth brought to her knees so that they could reap the rewards of her downfall. The Central Government of Earth . . .

"What of the Central Government?" Regan asked. "Do they know of all this?"

Cabrera shrugged. "They have their reports, but they strangle in a bureaucratic web of their own making. They govern but they do not rule; they administer but they do not control." The old man chuckled grimly. "The lessons of history teach us that the fate of races is decided by individuals, Regan, not by governments. I wield more power here, at Xanadu, than any six men with large offices and resounding titles. The family of Cabrera and others like them, they are the true rulers of Earth, they control the destiny of races, just as families like them have done since the dawn of history. The Cornwalls, the Quintos, the Orloffs. No, Regan, we are not alone, and not all of them think as we do. Ambition can be turned two ways, for the benefit of the race and for the benefit of the individual—"

"—but if the race loses so, too, does the individual," said Regan.

"There are those—like Malatest—who are prepared to gamble."

The initial horror he had felt as the tale unfolded had left Regan, and he felt himself caught up in the intrigue in a new and fascinating manner. Previously, he had been a pawn, unknowing and scared by that lack of knowledge. Now, he knew, and in the knowing there was a feeling of power, a feeling that he was in the centre of things, the sharer of knowledge common to but a very few. And those few ruled the Earth, they ruled the colony worlds, they dominated the human race in a secret, terrible manner that ignored politicians and governments, and they went about their business unnoticed by the myriads who lived and died, who worked and played in the shadow of their patronage, as Regan had done more than two years ago.

He thought of the chubby, cigar-smoking figure of Manuel Cabrera in that tiny cabin aboard the Ferroval cruiser. A man who was witty, knowledgeable, charming to a degree—a man with the fate of the Universe inside his bald head and behind his fleshy lips.

And still there was a question at the back of his mind that he could not frame, something that would not force itself to the forefront of his consciousness. Almost, it seemed, that there

was a black fog within which there gleamed a tiny spark of light that would blazen forth in all its glory if it was given the opportunity.

Beside him Giselle's clothes rustled as she rose from her chair.

"Father, it is long past the hour for lunch. If my 'brother' has no more questions—"

The old man looked steadily at him. "Well, Regan? What of our bargain? I have given you the knowledge that you sought. Will you help us in our fight?"

"Fight?" Regan laughed harshly. "There is no fight—you have nothing left with which to fight. Manuel is gone and his secret will not easily come into your hands again."

"But still there is hope," said Carlo. "While my uncle lives to guide us we shall pursue the course that he has chosen. There may be more than one answer, Regan."

Regan shrugged. There was little he could do. His own existence depended on his association with the family of Cabrera, and there was no one outside this room—save Manuel's mother—to whom he could prove his identity. He had asked for knowledge and he had got it, but it was of little use to him.

"Well?" asked the old man.

"Yes, I will do your bidding—for the time being at any rate."

"Then you may escort me to lunch." Giselle smiled mockingly at him.

"I am honoured," said Regan, "but no. It is not long since I breakfasted, and I have a great deal to think about." He looked at Cabrera. "I want to see more of Xanadu. Is it forbidden that I should walk around alone?"

"Xanadu is yours while you are one of us."

Regan left the house by the wide main door, and followed the path away from the house towards the wooded hills that lay to the left. He needed time to think, time to ponder on what he had learned, to assimilate the knowledge and to become further familiar with the new world into which he had been pitched. He wasn't like Carlo or Armand or Giselle; they had grown up in the world into which he had been so unceremoniously dragged. They accepted their position just as he had accepted his, and they would have been as out of place on Caledon as he was here, on Earth. Intrigue and political manoeuvre were

foreign to Regan, yet they accepted it as part of their heritage, they used it for their own ends and they were not frightened by the ceaseless tide of move and countermove in which they were involved.

He walked fast, his body sweating slightly in the hot sun, and his muscles rejoiced in the freedom of movement. He crossed the wide green meadow that lay beyond the trees sheltering the house, and the carpet of the grass was dotted abundantly with yellow flowers. Ahead of him the ground rose towards a hill-side that bore woods and trees such as he had never seen on Caledon. He came to a stream that followed the lie of the land down to the centre of the valley, and he followed its banks up the slope and into the shade of the trees. Surprisingly, birds sang above his head, the few survivors of another age that was gone, the unknowing victims of Man's lust for expansion.

The trees thickened around him, and through the high branches and the leaves the sun broke and played in dappled patterns on the forest floor. He thought of that other forest, so close in time and so far away in distance, where he had carried the old man in his arms, and then turned to wreak death on those who had followed.

But Ferroval could not begin to compare with Xanadu.

The grass was warm and soft, and he lay down on it with his head cradled on one prosthetic forearm. Through his dark glasses the sun shone strongly, but his eyes cut out the excess light so that he lay in a quiet, dark oasis, peaceful, with the warmth upon his face, and a light breeze around his head.

His thoughts ran in endless circles which led him nowhere, they ran riot, seeking order out of chaos, but, as the answers failed to come, he allowed himself to drift into an aura of well being. He dozed lightly, and lay at peace for he knew not how long.

The strange thudding reached his ears but took long seconds to penetrate his mind ; he half listened to it without comprehension while it drew nearer—a rhythmic pounding, muffled in some strange manner. His body moved even as his mind took fright, and he rolled away down the side of the mound, keeping low, and scrambling on all fours for the shelter of the trees on the far side. The action was a reflex one, born of a mind which he had unconsciously trained to suspicion, and he recognised his move as being unjustified. Yet he stayed in his cover, his eyes probing into the forest, seeking the source of the sounds as they drew nearer to the place in which he lay.

s e v e n t e e n

From his cover in the trees he saw the girl long before she reached the clearing, and the reason for the strange sound of her approach was made clear to him. She was mounted on a magnificent black horse that moved at an easy canter between the trees.

Regan realised with a slight shock that he had never previously heard the sound of a horse's hooves as they pounded on soft turf.

She was clad as she had been in old Cabrera's study earlier that morning, and her black hair blew free behind her as she rode. She came confidently along the path which Regan had used earlier, and when she reached the clearing she reigned in the horse on the top of the rise which Regan had so recently left.

"Regan," she called. She sat confidently on the great, black animal, and she lifted her head regally to call her summons.

"Regan, where are you?"

Slowly, Regan rose from cover, surprised and wary. Surprised by her appearance, and wary of her reasons for coming.

A faint smile twitched her lips as she saw him, and she swung herself down from the saddle in one lithe, easy movement. The horse moved away down the slope as she patted it on the rump, and stopped at the foot of the mound to crop the lush grass.

"Do you hide from me, Regan?" As always her voice mocked him.

"No." He left the shelter of the trees, and climbed back up the slope towards her. "My reflexes have developed their own suspicions since my association with the family Cabrera."

Giselle chuckled and sat down on the grass almost exactly on the spot from which he had so recently moved.

Regan looked down at her, and asked, "How did you find me?"

"I watched you from the house as you crossed the meadow, and I guessed that you would follow the stream. This is a spot which I, too, visit."

"Why?"

"Because I like it."

Regan gestured irritably. "You know what I mean. Why did you follow me?"

The violet eyes flickered at him speculatively. "You still have your suspicions, Regan, I can read them on you like a badge."

"And aren't I right to have them? Or would you have me believe that you are fascinated by my good looks?" Regan snapped the words out bitterly, the sarcasm forced from him both by her presence and her beauty. He realised that he was not yet immune, that he was still sensitive of his appearance.

She laughed at him. "Do you think that I am fascinated by your ugliness?"

"Some women find brutality amusing."

"You think too much of yourself," she told him tersely. "I have been surrounded too long by pretty-pretty boys with sweet faces and evil minds. You really think I care about the look of a man?"

Regan took off the glasses with a swift motion. "Don't you?"

She eyed him steadily, her gaze probing every facet of his scarred face with its baby skin and bulging eyes, and Regan stood feeling as if insects crawled across him, seeking out every nook and cranny, every scar and wrinkle.

"You pity yourself too much, Regan." She looked away at last. "What are you going to do?"

"What should I do? Is that what you have come here for?"

She shook her head. "No. You have thrown in your lot with my father. You are doing his bidding. Why?"

"Perhaps I have no choice. I cannot prove who I am, and outside of Xanadu I am naked in a hostile environment. You saw what happened when I fell for your cousin's ruse, and got into the hands of Malatest. Your father is my protection. If he survives then I survive with him—without him I am a dead man."

"Then you will stay at Xanadu and hope for a happy ending? Is that it?"

"Perhaps."

"Don't you want to go home again? To Caledon, to your family?"

"Why are you so interested in my future?" Regan demanded. "Did you follow me out here just to satisfy your curiosity?"

"No. I came because this is the one place where you and I can talk alone and unobserved."

Regan stared down at her in amazement. "Why should that be necessary? Is Xanadu not safe? Couldn't we have talked at the house?"

"Perhaps. I don't know." She shook her head quickly and plucked a few strands of grass from the ground. "Since my brother died I have had no one in Xanadu to whom I could speak—no one to whom I could confide a secret that has burned within my brain for more than two years."

"What of your father?"

"Not even him." She looked up at him from her seat on the mound. "Sit down, Regan, then I shall know that you are not going to fall on me." A ghost of a smile twitched her too perfect lips as she said it, and Regan felt himself flush unaccountably. He sat down.

"You have been drawn into this sorry business through no fault of your own, Regan. You are the one person I know who is totally and completely disinterested."

"I would have thought that I was the most interested of all."

"Because of your face? Because of your limbs? Your eyes? Your scars?" She shook her head. "Those are the marks of your disinterest. Those are the things which tell me that you were involved by accident, against your own wishes—they tell me very clearly that I can trust you."

Regan said nothing. He looked away through the trees, and suddenly he was afraid of his possible involvement with this woman—afraid of her confidences and what they might lead to. He knew with a desperate denial that he didn't want her to unburden herself of a secret that she could not trust to her own father. And yet—why couldn't she?

"Why not to your father?"

"Because Carlo and Armand are too close to him. He needs men around him now that Manuel is dead, and, next to me, they are his closest kin. If I had told him, then they would have known in a short while. It is the nature of things."

"Go on."

"If I tell you—will you help?"

"I do not know if I shall be able to."

"Then—if you cannot, will you keep silent?"

Regan nodded. "That much I will promise."

"There is mistrust in Xanadu," said the girl. "I do not know how or why. I only know that Manuel would trust no one, not even our father. You know of the trouble he had in trying to leave Earth?"

Regan nodded.

"And you know, too well, that his efforts came to nought."

"Indeed I do."

"I think he had a premonition that he would not be successful because the night before he was due to leave he came to me after dinner as I walked on the terrace before the house." She threw away the twisted strands of grass and pulled another handful. "We were never very close—in fact, we were so far apart that we were not even antagonistic as brother and sister sometimes are, and yet, on that last evening we talked together as we had never talked in all our lives before. Looking back I think that he had some presentiment that he should make some small gesture in defiance of the future. Much of what he said was of no consequence either then or now, but at the end he did say one thing—and he said it twice—he told me to remember it against the day when it would be of some use."

She paused and looked at Regan, her face white and serious.

"I think that day has come, Regan. I think that you are the only person to whom I can turn, with whom I can share my brother's secret. If there be knowledge in what he told me, then you are the one who can use it, because—to the world beyond Xanadu—you are Manuel Cabrera."

Regar stared unseeingly at the trees. His brain told him to refuse, to back off while there was still time ; his heart and his curiosity were in another place—they were back in the screaming, burning horror of the Ferroval cruiser, they were back in the dark cocoon of pain from which he had emerged after nearly two years of horrible gestation.

"What did he tell you?"

"He said—" she hesitated, and he knew that, even now, after all this long time, she was loath to reveal her trust. Regan did not press her. "He said, 'Remember the planet, Cleomon, and a man named Arfon Plender.' That was all."

The sun was bright in the small clearing, and the song of the birds seemed unnaturally loud in Regan's ears. Xanadu was close to his heart, and the Universe was a distant place full of strangeness and unease. Xanadu was quiet.

"What will you do?" she asked quietly.

Regan shrugged. "I don't know. What should I do? There is little enough in what you have told me."

"I know." She stood up stretching herself. "I have been away long enough. I must ride back." She looked down at him, her face strained and sombre. "What of you, Regan?"

"I need to think," said Regan slowly. "I came here to think, and now I have something to chew on."

She laughed suddenly and surprisingly. "I feel better now that I have told you. These last days—knowing that you were not Manuel, knowing that I was alone with what he had told me—"

"At least I have been a good listener." Regan smiled up at her.

"And for that I thank you. And, Regan," her smile was gone once more, "if you should speak to me of this again, do it quietly—"

"I will be discreet."

He watched her as she went down the slope and mounted the horse. She cantered away through the trees without so much as a backward glance, and soon the forest hid her from view.

eighteen

Only his 'cousins' Roberto and Anita were missing from the dinner table that evening. Roberto was on a business trip of some unspecified nature, and Anita—so Regan gathered—was on a visit to a man who might be her future husband, if the rest of the family approved.

Regan only hoped that the omissions from the family gathering would not seriously interfere with the plans which he had formulated.

For the most part he sat quiet and introspective while the conversation ebbed and flowed around him. There was gossip which did not interest him; business talk which was above his head; some sly digs from the thin, saturnine figure of Simon which he answered caustically and with a biting sarcasm that drew a mild reproof from the old man. These things apart he sat quietly and waited and wondered.

The meal drew to a close and the ladies left the room. Giselle—her eyes had hardly left him during the whole time they sat opposite each other—hesitated near the door. As Regan looked at her he read doubt in the violet eyes, and he nodded slightly and with reassurance. The doubt vanished to be

replaced by a ghost of a smile, then she turned and followed the others from the room.

The brandy came and the blue smoke of cigars tainted the air. The servants withdrew and Regan wondered how he should open up the game he wanted to play.

The question was resolved for him by Simon, who asked, suddenly, "And what escapades have you planned for the future, cousin? By your silence this evening I judge that you have something serious in view."

"Simon," snapped the old man from the head of the table, "it must be clear to you that your cousin is in no mood for such humour."

"Surely, uncle, we are entitled to know what trouble we are likely to be caused?" Simon taunted Regan with his sardonic smile. "After all, it took you to extricate him from Malatest's little trap. Next time, it might take all of us."

"Your humour is misplaced, cousin," said Regan, coldly and quickly, before Cabrera could intervene again. "At least I attempted something which would, no doubt, be beyond your own capabilities to try."

The humourless smile and the faint flush that darkened Simon's cheeks told him that the shaft had not been misplaced.

"Father," he turned to the old man, "I have thought on our discussion since this morning—" He sensed Carlo stiffen beside him, but the old man gave no sign—"and I still believe that positive action is the only thing which will solve our problems."

"Haven't you had enough of positive action?" asked Armand.

"Would you rather we sat here and waited for others to do before us that which we should do ourselves?" Regan snapped.

"What are your thoughts?" asked the old man.

"I shall leave here as soon as possible on the same mission that ended so disastrously two years ago."

Blank, utter astonishment greeted his announcement. The whole room was a frozen tableau broken only by the slow upward movement of Regan's hand as he took a sip of brandy from the glass before him.

"You're mad," whispered Pedro from the far side of the table.

"I don't think so."

"What game are you playing, cousin?" the hard voice of Carlo asked a question that had two answers, and Regan smiled as he read the warning note in the black man's voice.

"A game that should have been played long ago," Regan replied. "It was a mistake for me ever to have returned here. I should have carried on from Ferroval as soon as I was fit and well. Oh, yes, I know—" he waved away the interruption from Armand,—"I should have been in danger on Ferroval, yet not as much as we all thought. My death is not so important as it once was. The most important factor is now the carrier which is lost to us forever. Our opponents are playing for time until they can gain entrance to the carrier by obtaining possession of my person, but if I should leave Earth then they will be forced into one of two courses of action.

"First, they will have to find whence I am gone, and second, they will be forced to try and open the carrier by artificial means—and if they try that then they may well destroy the contents, which will suit us admirably."

"They knew where you were headed before," Pedro said grimly.

"Because the precautions I took were too elaborate and too long drawn out."

"And what will you do this time?" asked Cabrera softly.

"I will leave at once." Regan sat up straight in his chair and laid his hands flat on the table with an air of finality. "The ship that brought us from Ferroval is still in orbit, and I can be aboard her within the next three hours. This time my destination is secret. I was a fool before to think that travel by ordinary commercial cruiser would afford me protection."

"I say it is madness," rasped Carlo.

"And I," said Armand.

"But still, there is merit in the argument," put in Pedro. "Do you not agree, brother?"

Regan turned and looked at the thin, old form of Cabrera. The dark eyes gleamed from the lined face, but there was no message for Regan in them. They were inscrutable. He could almost see the workings of the old man's brain as he weighed the situation carefully, balancing the facts, probing Regan's intentions, seeking for the twist that was implied by Regan's shock announcement.

"This needs to be thought on," he said at last.

"No," snapped Regan. "If we wait too long the chance will be lost. If I am to move it must be swiftly—and it must be now."

"What he says is true," said Pedro.

"It is impossible," rasped Armand, and Regan noted with some amusement the rage and frustration on the thin face. Clearly, the man had his own ideas about Regan's sudden plans; equally clearly he dare not say what he wanted to say about them.

Regan turned the knife a little, and said, "Well, Father?" He knew perfectly well that he had all the cards. If the old man refused point blank he would raise questions as to his motives that would be difficult to answer; if he agreed then he would be acting contrary to his own ideas—he would be agreeing to a form of blackmail, the end of which was hidden to him.

The old man was caught, and he knew it.

"You did not prevent me before," said Regan softly, "and the situation is even more perilous now than it was then."

"What he says is true, brother," insisted Pedro. "The position demands some urgent action, and if Manuel goes ahead with this—this secret plan of his then at least we are fighting back. As it is we have stagnated for two years waiting for Manuel to return to us. And now he is you hesitate—"

"Not stagnated," said Cabrera. "We kept my son alive during all that time."

The dark, old eyes never left Regan's face. They probed him with unwinking implacability, and in their depths Regan could read his own strength. The eyes slid away from him at last; one brown hand reached for the brandy glass, and the old man drained it in a manner that was almost sacrilegious. Then, slowly, he rose to his feet.

"Give me your arm. Manuel," he ordered. "We will talk in my study—alone."

"Brother, I protest," rasped Pedro. "This is a family matter—"

"We are as concerned in this as much as you, uncle." Carlo, too had risen to his feet.

"Be silent and remember your positions. While I am head of the family I will conduct our affairs as I think fit." The old man nodded to Regan. "Come, we will talk."

He leaned heavily on Regan's right arm, and they left the room amid complete silence. The cold anger of Carlo and the

white face of Armand gave Regan more pleasure than he would have believed possible. The very fact that he, an outsider, had dared to flout them in such a manner—had dared to hold a pistol at the head of old Cabrera—! Regan almost laughed aloud as the door closed behind them. They climbed the stairs and went along the wide, carpeted corridors towards the old man's study. Not one word was spoken between them.

A fire burned brightly in the room as they entered it, and the lights were soft and muted, adding to the age of the furnishings and the decor.

“One of my few personal indulgencies.” Cabrera waved to the fire. “The flicker of the flames warms my heart rather than my body.”

“If we are to speak—”

A wave of the old man's right hand silenced him, and he watched with understanding as Cabrera crossed slowly to his vast desk and pressed two buttons on the control panel of what Regan had taken to be an intercom unit.

“The room is shielded, Regan,” Cabrera told him. “We can talk in private and none will be able to hear us.”

“Do you not trust the family?”

“That is unworthy of you.”

“I apologise.”

“It is no matter.” Cabrera sat down in a large, easy chair beside the fire. “The taunt is justified as you well know from what you have seen and heard. Now, what is all this nonsense about following in Manuel's path? How can that be possible?”

“It isn't.” Regan sat down opposite the old man, and stared at the flames. He had thought about this moment all afternoon in the quietness of the forest, and now that the time had come he doubted his ability to carry it through—he doubted that he was skilled enough to out think and out talk Cabrera. For once he was glad of alien eyes behind their dark glasses; at least they would not betray him.

“Come, is it so hard to explain?”

“Manuel was headed for Ferroval,” Regan said carefully. “He never got there. The trail leads on from Ferroval, and on Ferroval may lie the clue to the next stage of his journey.”

“After two years the trail may be cold and dead.”

“I don't think so. Manuel could not possibly have done this on his own. He had a plan—what it was no one knows—but a plan has to depend on other people, and that means that some-

where there is someone who is waiting for Manuel Cabrera to return to the scene. His plan could never depend on himself alone, that would not make sense, nor would it be possible, but if I go to Ferroval then the trail may be uncovered again—the trail that you think is dead."

" You were on Ferroval for almost eighteen months," Cabrera pointed out. " Why was no approach made during all that time ?"

" What good would it have done ? I wasn't capable of doing anything, and I was practically incommunicado—you saw to that. In fact, isn't it more than likely that my whereabouts—even the fact of Manuel's survival—might not have reached the ears of those with whom Manuel was connected ?"

" It is possible, but unlikely. Too many people knew once the news was given out that the person in the hands of the Licharians was my son." The old man gestured wearily. " We tried to cover the leak, but it was too late—"

" Exactly," snapped Regan. " You have made my point for me. If it is known that Manuel is still alive, and that he is back on Ferroval, then there will be attempts to contact him again."

" And those attempts will be made by more people than you would desire, Regan. If you left the Earth the news would be common to all within hours."

" Then what will you do ? Sit here in your armchair and hope that death will claim you before you need to make a move ?" sneered Regan. " Cabrera, are you too old to make such a decision ? What is holding you back ? Is it your fear for my safety ? Why should that bother you—I am not Manuel."

The old man looked away from Regan and into the fire ; for a moment Regan thought that he had gone too far. Then Cabrera said, slowly, " My son was a law unto himself. I could not have stopped him in anything he wished to do."

" Then why prevent me ?"

" You came into this matter through no fault of your own, and you have co-operated with us far beyond any reasonable limits that we might have expected. I owe you something—"

" You owe me nothing save the right to live out the remainder of my life as I desire," retorted Regan. " What should I do, Cabrera ? Skulk in your shadow while you live and trust to the charity of your nephews when you are gone ? You cannot just sit back and do nothing. Inaction can be more dangerous

than to make a wrong move—and I think that this move which I propose is the only one left open to you."

And still the old man looked at the fire.

A log broke and crackled, sending a shower of sparks up the wide chimney. Regan felt the muscles of his body harden with the tension of waiting. He wondered just how convincing his argument had been. Enough to fool Cabrera? Enough for him to ascend the first rung of the ladder that he had planned, and whose top was shrouded in the mists of uncertainty?

"So be it," said Cabrera with a sigh. "If my debt to you can be settled thus, then I have no right to withhold payment. What do you wish?"

"Money—as much as you think necessary, and the ship—with orders that the crew shall do my bidding in all matters."

For a moment Regan thought that he had overstepped the mark. The dark eyes flickered back at him, and the brow, creased with age, gathered the further wrinkles of a frown. Cabrera sighed again, and nodded. "I will make it so, Regan—you go with my blessing."

To be concluded

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Guest Editorial continued

No matter how imaginative or closely-reasoned, his yarn must not be a pure idea or problem story moved along by characters fabricated from processed woodpulp. Yet he must not devote so much time to deepening and rounding off his characters that the science fictional content loses prominence, because if he does that he is in danger of being told to send his stuff to one of the women's magazines and stop trying to palm it off as s-f. He should also be daring, controversial and different in his ideas and treatment, but not too different or they will start castigating him as a dirty Fascist and warmonger.

From this welter of contradictory advice and opinions, it would seem that the science fiction reading public just does not know what it wants, our writer is thinking, and that the aforementioned public should be told to take a running jump into the nearest hyperdimensional vortex, but suppresses this idea as being the product of hasty and emotional thinking and unworthy of his fine, sensitive, well-integrated mind. (At least one person has to believe that he has a fine, sensitive mind, otherwise his struggle to write s-f would be pointless.) Besides, the individual members of the reading public *do* know what they want. When pinned down they will admit that there are very good stories written in the categories of which they do not approve, such as pure idea stories, problem stories and even psi stories. What they want him to write is a *good* story, that's all.

And a *good* story, according to this articulate, pinned-down member of a highly articulate group, has within it such items as the sheer weight of technical and scientific detail which characterise the work of Hal Clement, the vast humanity, insight and sheer literary brilliance of Sturgeon and Bester, the action, pace and unbearably mounting tension of Harry Harrison and, of course, a goodly dollop of that indefinable something which is part enthusiasm, part talent, part a certain innocence and freshness of outlook and part that quality which the French so charmingly translate as "I don't know."

At this point our writer is beginning to feel sorely perplexed, or maybe just sore. If he doesn't do everything they tell him he will be accused of killing science fiction with his crummy plots and greed for money. Too much is expected of him, he

is thinking ; the readers are unfair in demanding too much, the editors are being unfair in reflecting and concentrating the unfair demands of the readers, and the Russians are being extremely unfair in peopling space with unpronounceable names and unbelievable characters. Generally he feels persecuted and oppressed. So he punches his cushion a few times to relieve his feelings and to get rid of the lumps and settles down to work.

This story, he suspects, will probably not make Clement and Bester and Harrison shake in their shoes when the next Hugo nominations are counted, although he is going to try hard to make them shake just a little. But he has to be realistic about this thing. Hal Clement is a real live scientist and an extremely potent being indeed, who uses this name to conceal the fact that he is in reality Hari Stubs, an agent of a technologically advanced future civilisation. Bester, Sturgeon and Heinlein are geniuses and always have been. There is no record of them ever having written a really poor story, so it's likely that they have sold their souls to the Devil. Harry Harrison probably *is* the Devil.

An average writer cannot compete with men of this quality. The only thing an average writer can do is try hard to write an above average story.

He has two plots in mind at the moment. One is a near-future space travel thing which has been kicking around in the notebook for months and the other is one which came to him the day before yesterday when he was weeding the garden and accidentally grabbed hold of a snail. The first is the one he would most like to do, but then the list of necessary qualities which a good science fiction story must contain starts unrolling through his mind again, and stops with a jerk at Technical Accuracy and Believable Characterisation. He begins to think unkind things about the Russians.

Whether he likes it or not, space in the near future is going to contain an awful lot of Russians, and a story which treats the situations honestly and realistically must contain a fair proportion of Russian characters. But while it is not too difficult to give depth to British or American astronauts, with the cosmonauts it is virtually impossible. There is no doubt that they are as brave and human and dedicated as their western colleagues—their television shows them hugging their kids and grinning all over their faces when they get a medal

and generally acting like the human beings which they undoubtedly are—but there are still basic differences in the way they affect people.

When there is an American-manned capsule on the way down there is tension, anxiety, maybe even a quick, slightly shame-faced prayer that the thing with him in it will not burn up on re-entry, while *nothing* ever seems to go wrong with Russian spaceships and spacemen. There is not enough background material available to make a Russian character real to the point where everyone would worry themselves sick about him, and if, through striving after realism as it is manifest today, the author ends a story with the hero landing after the successful completion of a hazardous mission in space and reporting all well in the form of a couple of thousand words of pro-Communist propaganda—this is reality!—he would probably not get the story accepted. So it had better be the snail thing.

This story's main character will be a Doctor, he decides, because doctors are usually good guys who, in s-f stories anyway, do not get involved with women. He agrees wholeheartedly with William Temple's view that women simply get in the way of the action in a s-f story, by having to have the most elementary facts about cyclotrons and such explained to them and generally playing the role of decorative Dr. Watsons. As well, with a doctor character there is a legitimate excuse for introducing buckets of gore in the shape of an industrial accident or natural catastrophe, rather than get his violence and drama by starting a war which he is against on principle.

So he starts the story, all the while trying to keep before his mind's eye the necessity for it having scope and technical accuracy and significance and Sense of Wonder and *Je ne sais quoi*...

Round about page three there is an interruption. His wife is calling up to him that the eldest boy has got spots and is droopy and won't even look at the Lone Ranger. Without dragging more than half his fine mind back from intergalactic space he reaches behind him for the British Red Cross Society's First Aid Manual No. 1—an invaluable textbook for medically inclined s-f authors—and looks for the symptoms Rash, Lassitude and Photophobia. A few minutes later he says in a tense, clipped voice which is remarkably like the one his

current hero is using, "German Measles." Subsequently when the real Doctor comes around and also says "German Measles," although in not quite such a dramatic voice, his wife is impressed and says so.

Naturally he is too busy at the moment to think of and appreciate his wife, or of the many ways she helps and encourages him and protects his tender ego against the slings and arrows of outrageous editors with words like "It doesn't matter what *he* says, it's the best story in the book!" Or with the firmer, more subtle form of encouragement like "Five hundred words before supper-time, Buster, or you don't get any . . .!"

And so we leave our average science fiction writer to his never-ending struggle to please all the readers all of the time. On one side is ranged his loving wife, adoring children, dependent goldfish and his fine, sensitive mind and on the other is the massed ranks of readers waiting to rend and tear. In this Guest Editorial I've tried to make the point that s-f writers are a misunderstood and oppressed minority, and that they should be encouraged more and jumped on less if the field is to improve. A writer honestly wants to produce good science fiction full of the Sense of Wonder and all the other essential qualities, and the science fiction readership is in the position of being his artistic conscience. But a conscience is supposed to prick him from time to time, not stick dirty great knives in his back.

James White

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Survey Report of 1962

by John Carnell

Eleven months ago, when reviewing the events of 1961, I stated that that year might well be termed the Year of the Renaissance by such observers and chroniclers as we have within the genre. I also hinted that 1962 would probably see some interesting developments in the field in general but hindsight has shown that these developments were almost all in Europe and mainly in Great Britain.

This prediction was based mainly upon the fact that I knew ABC Television were preparing a series of thirteen one-hour plays, and undoubtedly, the most exciting British s-f event was the "Out Of This World" Saturday night dramas which went from strength to strength and ended with a bang instead of a whimper with a fine adaptation by Bruce Stewart of Arthur Sellings' original story "The Tycoons," which we published in an early issue of *Science Fiction Adventures*. In fact, the only play in the series which was seriously criticised from various quarters was the Isaac Asimov story "Little Lost Robot," which did not come across very well visually.

Unfortunately, the series, while being acclaimed by most of the press critics (a rare thing in itself) was shown in the late summer and had to compete for many weeks with a top BBC viewing spot. This resulted in low viewer-participation figures from TAM (Television Audience Measurement) and the final decision, for the time being at any rate, is that there will not be another series. However, readers should look out for more s-f plays appearing in ABC's "Armchair Theatre," which made such a good job of John Wyndham's "Dumb Martian." As this is being written, a new four-part 45-minute s-f serial, "Dimension Of Fear," is due to start on ABC, but will be

almost over by the time this article sees publication. Nevertheless, it is an indication of what one can well expect from the Teddington studios.

Incidentally, ABC's former head of drama, Sydney Newman, has now left to become head of the BBC TV drama department, and his keen interest in science fiction may well produce something worthwhile there during 1963. Certainly, 1962 was a dismal and cheerless year on the BBC TV front, with only a mediocre sequel to Hoyle's earlier "A For Andromeda," and a third-rate 4-part serial entitled "The Monsters." On BBC radio, the only ray of sunshine was a good dramatisation of John Wyndham's last novel, "The Trouble With Lichen," and in this sphere of radio I was sorry to see that our old friend and author John Keir Cross, who has adapted many s-f stories for radio, moved over to the script team writing the deathless daily adventures of "The Archers" from the Midland studios.

During 1962, the old-established order of magazine science fiction remained unchanged; no existing magazines ceased publication and no new ones appeared (although early 1963 will see a bi-monthly companion magazine to *Galaxy*, in USA, and major improvements to its stable companion, *If*, all three edited by Frederik Pohl). Book production in USA increased a little over its former low ebb, yet at year's end there is not one single new title which readily comes to mind as being outstanding. Deciding on a "best" title for the year will be a more than difficult task for Conventioneers at Washington, D.C. next September.

Throughout the European countries, however, s-f book publication expanded considerably. In the UK, Victor Gollancz' series had a full and successful year, producing thirteen excellent titles, foremost among which were undoubtedly Arthur C. Clarke's *A Fall Of Moondust*, Frederik Pohl's *Drunkard's Walk*, Daniel F. Galouye's *Dark Universe* and the Kingsley Amis/Robert Conquest anthology *Spectrum Two*. Keeping up with the slowly expanding field, too, the Science Fiction Book Club in London increased its number of titles from eight to twelve a year and reported a steadily increasing membership. Faber and Faber Ltd., Dennis Dobson Ltd., and Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., continued to issue titles and indicate an expansion for 1963 and a number of other British publishers began to make plans for publishing the occasional s-f story.

This general increase in hardcover publication brought the expected expansion in the British paperback market, although this is still a rather slow growth and one in which the potential peak is still a long way off. Penguin's successful experiment with the Brian W. Aldiss anthology, *Penguin Science Fiction One*, now in its third printing, has resulted in a yearly commitment for him and also given him the position of selector/editor for their new twelve-titles-a-year s-f stories, which commences this Spring.

Paperback science fiction twice hit monthly best-seller lists for the first time—in Britain with the Wyndham/Parkes *The Outward Urge* from Penguin (the complete "Troon" stories which originally appeared in this magazine) and in USA with Judith Merril's *Best S-F 1961* published by Dell Books. In the UK, Four Square (now New English Library), Panther and Mayflower maintained their outputs with many good titles, and there was extensive distribution of various American editions from Ballantine, Pyramid, Bantam, Avon, and others.

American paperback publishing in the s-f field expanded still further, but, as with the hardcover titles, no really outstanding new novel was forthcoming although this section of the publishing market had its fair share of new material.

At the Chicago World S-F Convention in September, the delegates present voted Robert A. Heinlein's controversial novel *Stranger In A Strange Land* as the best book of 1961—a title I did not list last year in my own short list choice, my own preference being for Daniel F. Galouye's *Dark Universe*, a commendation agreed upon by Tom Boardman Jr., in *Books And Bookmen* when selecting his choice for that honour. At the same convention, Brian W. Aldiss received a "Hugo" award for the best novelette—his original story of "Hothouse" which formed the first part of the subsequent book by that title published by Faber & Faber and in USA by Signet (retitled *The Long Afternoon Of Earth*).

In Europe, both Germany and Italy showed signs of increased s-f publishing, especially of top quality British and American titles, but the most interesting and significant item took place, once again, on television. On December 11th, the Paris studios of Radio-Television-Francaise produced a 100-minute adaptation of E. C. Tubb's former *New Worlds Science Fiction* serial, "Star Ship," which was apparently very well done but received

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a mixed reception from the French critics. It was due to be shown on Belgian TV early in January. During 1962, too, R-T-F commenced researching into the possibilities of either a science fiction series of plays or one or more serials.

In Paris, too, the year ended on a fascinating note, when the Research Service of R-T-F put on a debate at UNESCO headquarters under the title of "They Are With Us," under the direction of Jacques Bergier, at which such notables as editor Georges Gallet, author Georges Langelaan, critic Pierre Versins, and many other French proponents of s-f took part. Papers on the subject were also read from Damon Knight, Leigh Brackett and Theodore Sturgeon.

To summarise, 1962 was an exceptionally good year for science fiction on a broad expanding front and, unlike the boom-and-bust years of 1954-56, appears to be a controlled movement in all branches of the medium rather than wild enthusiasm for a quick-profit market. However, my contention of a year ago that s-f is being changed more and more by outside influences still stands and is borne out by the events of the past year. Notice that no good s-f film appeared in 1962—but there are several in preparation, one major one which will probably not be ready until 1964 has seen our artist friend Brian Lewis involved in some of the design work and working, purely by coincidence, under the guidance of Ray Harryhausen, one of America's most outstanding scenic effects men—and a longtime enthusiast of the medium. During the year, also, Brian illustrated the series of Arthur Clarke futuristic articles which appeared in the *Sunday Citizen*.

1963 looks even more promising at this early date. We shall soon be serialising the first new novel to come from author E. C. Tubb in four years—"Window On The Moon"—his best to date and one which should see book publication on both sides of the Atlantic.

John Carnell

